



Maine Equal Justice

People Policy Solutions

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**Testimony on behalf of Maine Equal Justice in *Support* of LD 698, An Act to Sustain
Emergency Homeless Shelters in Maine**

March 18, 2025

Good afternoon, Senator Curry, Representative Gere, distinguished members of the Housing and Economic Development Committee. My name is Andrea Steward and I am a policy advocate at Maine Equal Justice, a nonprofit civil legal aid provider working to increase economic security, opportunity, and equity for people in Maine.

Thank you for the opportunity to provide testimony in support of LD 698.

Maine's homelessness response system is in a state of emergency. Stagnant funding and high rates of homelessness have created unsustainable deficits for shelter providers. As the number of unhoused individuals continues to rise, the strain on our emergency shelters grows more severe. Without immediate action, we risk further exacerbating an already dire situation.

State funding for emergency shelter operations has remained unchanged since 2016. During this time, additional shelter beds have been added, effectively reducing the funding allocated per bed. Simultaneously, the lack of affordable housing has increased the average length of shelter stays by 59% since 2017. This combination of stagnant funding and rising demand has pushed emergency shelters to the breaking point.

Emergency shelters are a lifeline—we cannot let them fail. They provide safety, warmth, and a crucial path to stable housing. The research is clear: individuals experiencing unsheltered homelessness face enormous barriers to accessing assistance.¹ They endure higher rates of physical and mental illness, substance use disorders, trauma, and even premature death.² If shelters are forced to cut services or close their doors, more people will be left outside exposed to danger. This is not a distant policy issue—this is a human crisis playing out in our communities every day.

¹ Janey Rountree, Nathan Hess, and Austin Lyke, California Policy Lab, Health Conditions Among Unsheltered Adults in the U.S. (2019). <https://www.capolcylab.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/02/Health-Conditions-Among-Unsheltered-Adults-in-the-U.S..pdf>

² The Network for Public Health Law, Series: Preventing Housing Instability Fact Sheet, (2021) <https://www.networkforphl.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/04/Fact-Sheet-Public-Health-Implications-of-Housing-Instability-Eviction-and-Homelessness.pdf>

I urge you, with all sincerity and urgency, to increase and sustain funding for Maine's emergency shelters. Investing in these life-saving services is a practical solution to mitigate the long-term social and economic impacts of homelessness, but this is not just a budgetary decision—it is a moral one. We have a responsibility to protect the most vulnerable among us because one day it could in fact, be us. Investing in emergency shelters is also a practical solution: it reduces the long-term costs of chronic homelessness while providing a bridge to permanent housing and renewed dignity.³

³ HUD, Promoting Mental Health Through Housing Stability (2022). <https://www.huduser.gov/portal/pdredge/pdr-edge-trending-053122.html> ; Kimberly Burrowes, Urban Institute, Can Housing Interventions Reduce Incarceration and Recidivism (2019). <https://housingmatters.urban.org/articles/can-housing-interventions-reduce-incarceration-and-recidivism>; ACLU, No Eviction, *supra* note 5, at 6; THE NETWORK FOR PUBLIC HEALTH LAW, THE PUBLIC HEALTH IMPLICATIONS OF HOUSING INSTABILITY, EVICTION, AND HOMELESSNESS (2021), <https://www.networkforphl.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/04/Fact-Sheet-Public-Health-Implications-of-Housing-Instability-Eviction-and-Homelessness.pdf>.