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March 25, 2025

Testimony of Rep. Cheryl Golek introducing

LD 743, An Act to Increase Bridging Rental Assistance Program Housing Voucher Funding to Reduce the Current Partial Waiting List and Increase Housing Vouchers for Persons Living with Mental Health Challenges
Before the Joint Standing Committee on Housing and Economic Development

Senator Curry, Representative Gere and members of the Housing and Economic Development Committee, my name is Cheryl Golek, and I represent District 99, which includes Harpswell and part of Brunswick. Today, I am presenting **LD 743, An Act to Increase Bridging Rental Assistance Program Housing Voucher Funding, to Reduce the Current Partial Waiting List and Increase Housing Vouchers for Persons Living with Mental Health Challenges.**

What is the Bridging Rental Assistance Program, also referred to as BRAP:

The BRAP program utilizes a model similar to the Housing First Model by providing rental assistance needed to create housing stability for adults with severe and persistent mental illness and co-occurring substance use disorders and then referring these individuals to supportive services in the community based on their needs.

BRAP is an established program that has been around for more than 20 years and has a proven record of positive results.

Why is this bill needed:

On March 25, 2020, the State of Maine Department of Health and Human Services released a memo Titled, "Addressing Challenges to Transitional Housing in Maine".

The memo stated that:

"The Bridging Rental Assistance Program (BRAP) assists clients with Serious Mental Illness, including those who also have a substance use disorder, with obtaining transitional housing. BRAP provides a rental subsidy and assists clients with finding independent housing in communities throughout Maine. A program of the DHHS Office of Behavioral Health, BRAP, is

intended to serve as a bridge between homelessness and more permanent housing options, such as Section 8.

Historically, BRAP required clients to contribute 51% of their income towards their monthly rent. However, this income burden has made it increasingly difficult for individuals to obtain and maintain stable, affordable housing. Recognizing these challenges, which have come into even greater focus in the face of COVID-19, as of May 21, 2020, BRAP transitioned to a 40% income contribution requirement. This provided financial relief to clients, giving them greater stability in the community in which they live. The transition was expected to be completed by July 1, 2020, for all new and existing BRAP participants.

I applaud the Department of Health and Human Services. This decision makes the program feasible for those it is meant to serve. This brings us to the reason this bill is needed. The issue today is that the 11% promised increase discussed in the memo from DHHS was not budgeted for.

The effects of not providing the promised funds are being felt.

The Shalom House serves as the Central Administrative Agency (CAA) for the State of Maine's Department of Health and Human Services (DHHS), Office of Behavioral Health (OBH), providing statewide administration of the Bridging Rental Assistance Program (BRAP). The Shalom House sent a memo on March, 21, stating, "Because of the unprecedented need for assistance, we have instituted a complete pause on all new application submissions and awards, effective March 24, 2025."

On the same day, the Shalom House released this statement: Mental health service providers stood in the hall of flags alongside legislatures of both parties, stating that Maine is at a critical point when it comes to ensuring people can get help when needed. The executive director of the Alliance for Addiction and Mental Health Services said, "Ever since coming out of the pandemic, Maine has experienced an unprecedented level of demand for mental health and substance use disorder treatment services,"

BRAP serves individuals leaving psychiatric hospitals, community residential programs, and homeless programs throughout the state. The urgency of the situation of funding the program cannot be overstated.

I do not know if it was an error or a decision not to include the 11% increase in the BRAP budget. I do know that the lack of the promised funding has real-life consequences for one of our state's most vulnerable populations. This program that provides a lifesaving bridge to stability is currently drowning because of that financial promise not being honored. Today, we have an opportunity to revive the BRAP program and save lives.

We will restore the amount of funding promised when the percentage change is made and increase the funding capacity to increase the number of vouchers statewide. The potential impact of this bill is significant. The function of the BRAP program and the safety and well-being of the people it serves depend on it.

Thank you for your time and consideration. Please join me in supporting LD 748. I am happy to answer any questions you may have.

General Program Eligibility

Who is eligible?

Adults with a Severe and Disabling Mental Illness who:

1. Are enrolled in or qualify for Sections 17 Community Support Services or Section 97 Community Residential Treatment Programs.

Specific Requirements.

The person is age eighteen (18) or older or is an emancipated minor with:

Has a primary diagnosis of Schizophrenia or Schizo-affective disorder or another non-excluded primary DSM 5 diagnosis or DSM 4 equivalent.

Excluded Diagnosis include, but are not limited to: Neuro-cognitive Disorders, Neuro-developmental Disorders, Antisocial Personality Disorder and Substance Use Disorders.

Examples of excluded diagnosis include, but are not limited to:

Alzheimer's, Antisocial Personality disorder, Attention Deficit and Hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), Autism, Intellectual and learning disabilities, Parkinson's disease, and Substance Abuse Disorders (unless they are co-occurring with an eligible diagnosis).

Has significant impairment or limitation in adaptive behavior or functioning directly related to the primary diagnosis and defined by the LOCUS or other acceptable standardized assessment tools approved by the Department.

Must have a LOCUS score, as determined by a LOCUS Certified Assessor, of seventeen (17) (Level III) or greater, except that to be eligible for Community Rehabilitation Services

(17.04-2) and ACT (17.04-3), the member must have a LOCUS score of twenty (20) (Level IV) or greater.

Risk Factors:

Has a documented or reported history, stating that he/she is likely to have future episodes of homelessness, criminal justice involvement, or require mental health inpatient treatment greater than 72 hours, or residential treatment related to mental illness.

2. Currently receives SSI/SSDI benefits, or have applied for benefits

3. Has applied for a Section 8 Housing Voucher, or is currently on the wait-list.

4. Fits in one of the following priorities.

Priority 1: Psychiatric Discharge after seventy-two (72) hour or greater psychiatric inpatient hospital admission

Individuals who are being discharged, or were discharged within the past thirty (30) days from:

Riverview Psychiatric Center or Dorothea Dix Psychiatric Center.

A private psychiatric hospital or facility.

Individuals who are moving from a Community Residential Treatment Program to less restrictive accommodations to allow for appropriate discharges, as determined by the clinical team from the institutions mentioned above.

Priority 2: Release from a Correctional Facility

Individuals who have been released within the last thirty (30) days, or will be released within the next thirty (30) days, from confinement in a Correctional Facility and have no

subsequent residences identified, or have been adjudicated through a Mental Health treatment court.

Priority 3: Literal Homelessness, as defined by HUD

An individual or family who:

Has a primary nighttime residence that is a public or private place not meant for human habitation.

Examples include, but are not limited to:

Living in a tent, in a public park, or in the woods.

Living in a camper or RV that is substandard and does not have access to clean water and utilities.*

Living in an insulated shed in a friend's backyard with no access to the residence.

Is living in a homeless shelter or designated temporary living arrangements (to include congregate shelters, transitional housing, and hotels and motels paid for by charitable organizations or by federal, state and local government programs).

Examples include, but are not limited to:

Emergency Shelters

Transitional housing and voucher programs, as long as individual was verified to be homeless before entry.

Living in a motel paid by a charity, local General Assistance office, non-profit, religious organization, etc.

What does not count as homelessness?

Sleeping in a RV or Camper that is properly maintained, has functioning onboard water and sewer connection (including functioning storage tank as designed), and can retain heat during the winter.

Staying at a hotel paid by a family member, friend, insurance policy, or employer

Living in a transitional housing program where prior homelessness cannot be verified.

Living in a transitional housing program for substance abuse, or as part of a condition of release from incarceration.

Evictions

Staying with a friend, family member, or another person (couch surfing)

Victim of Domestic Violence

Is fleeing, or is attempting to flee, domestic violence; and

Has no other residence; and

Lacks the resources or support networks to obtain other permanent housing

"Domestic Violence" includes dating violence, sexual assault, stalking, and other dangerous or life-threatening conditions that relate to violence against the individual or family member that either takes place in, or makes him or her afraid to return to, their primary nighttime residence (including human trafficking).

*Some restrictions and/or additional requirements may apply

<https://www.shalomhouseinc.org/what-we-do/housing-services/subsidies/bridging-rental-assistance-program/>

Addressing Challenges to Transitional Housing in Maine

March 25, 2020

The [Bridging Rental Assistance Program \(BRAP\)](#) assists clients with Serious Mental Illness, including those who also have a Substance Use Disorder, with obtaining transitional housing. BRAP provides a rental subsidy and assists clients with finding independent housing in communities throughout Maine. A program of the DHHS Office of Behavioral Health, BRAP is intended to serve as a bridge between homelessness and more permanent housing options, such as Section 8.

Historically, BRAP required clients to contribute 51% of their income towards their monthly rent. However, this income burden has made it increasingly difficult for individuals to obtain and maintain stable, affordable housing. Recognizing these challenges, which have come into even greater focus in the face of COVID-19, BRAP will transition to a 40% income contribution requirement beginning May 1, 2020. This will provide financial relief to clients, giving them greater stability in the community in which they live.

The transition is expected to be completed by July 1, 2020 for all new and existing BRAP participants.

<https://www.maine.gov/dhhs/blog/addressing-challenges-transitional-housing-maine-2020-04-03>