

DISABILITY RIGHTS MAINE

March 25, 2025

Senator Chip Curry, Chair
Representative Traci Gere, Chair
Committee on Housing and Economic Development
Cross Office Building, Room 206
Augusta, Maine 04333

Re: Testimony in Support of LD 748 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

Dear Senator Curry, Representative Gere, and Members of the Committee on Housing and Economic Development:

My name is Mark Joyce, and I am a managing attorney at Disability Rights Maine (DRM), Maine's designated protection and advocacy agency for individuals with disabilities. DRM supports LD 748.

The Bridging Rental Assistance Program (BRAP) is a state-funded specialized housing voucher program in which participants pay 40% of their income for rent. BRAP subsidizes the remainder up to Fair Market Rent.

Unlike typical housing assistance based solely on financial need, BRAP vouchers are reserved for individuals with psychiatric disabilities. Only adults who qualify for Community Support Services under Section 17 of the MaineCare Benefits Manual are eligible for BRAP vouchers.

To qualify under this section of MaineCare a person must both:

1. **Have a qualifying psychiatric diagnosis, either:**
 - o A primary diagnosis of schizophrenia or schizoaffective disorder, or
 - o Another serious mental illness (excluding substance use disorders, antisocial personality disorder, neurodevelopmental, and neurocognitive disorders) and meet one of the following:
 - High risk of homelessness, hospitalization, or justice involvement
 - Recent treatment at a state psychiatric or mental health residential facility
 - Two psychiatric hospitalizations (72+ hours each) in the last two years
 - History of court-ordered psychiatric treatment
 - Previously identified as a youth with serious emotional disturbance and deemed still at high risk

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2. **Demonstrate significant functional limitations due to mental illness**, as measured by standardized tools like the Level of Care Utilization System (LOCUS), with eligibility requiring a score of 17 or higher.

BRAP also prioritizes three groups:

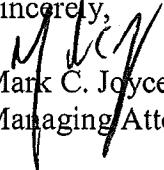
- **Psychiatric Discharges:** Adults recently discharged (or soon to be) from psychiatric hospitals or residential treatment.
- **Correctional Discharges:** Adults released from correctional facilities, including Mental Health Treatment Court participants.
- **Homeless Individuals:** Adults meeting HUD's definition of homelessness.¹

Before 2021, participants were required to pay 51% of their income, categorizing them as "severely rent burdened" under HUD standards. This disqualified many from rental opportunities due to housing provider policies. In 2021, this was lowered to 40%. LD 748 helps address rising program costs related to that change.

The cost difference between housing and institutional care is staggering. For example, the HUD Fair Market Rent for a one-bedroom apartment in Augusta is \$901/month². One day of involuntary hospitalization at MaineGeneral in Augusta costs \$4,503³. Even with a rent of \$1,100/month, *a three-day hospital stay would cover an entire year's rent.*

While increasing funding may seem counterintuitive as a cost-saving measure, adequately funding BRAP prevents far costlier outcomes. As OBH notes, "*BRAP has been established in recognition that recovery can only begin in a safe, healthy, and decent environment—a place one can call home*"⁴ Without stable housing, individuals are more likely to end up in institutional settings, with exponentially higher costs. This is not the only financial pressure facing BRAP. On March 24, 2025, OBH announced a pause on all new BRAP awards due to "unprecedented increased need."⁵ The need for this program has only grown since the introduction of LD 748.

For all these reasons, DRM urges the Committee to vote Ought to Pass on LD 748.

Sincerely,

Mark C. Joyce
Managing Attorney

¹ See BRAP Eligibility Guideline: <https://www.maine.gov/dhhs/obh/support-services/housing-services>. Adults "who meet eligibility criteria for Community Support Services, as defined in the most recent version of Section 17 of the MaineCare Benefits Manual."

² Although this is a state program, BRAP utilizes the Department of Housing and Urban Development's Fair Market Rent calculations. <https://www.huduser.gov/portal/datasets/fmr.html>

³ MaineGeneral Medical Center Price List July 1, 2024. <https://www.maine-general.org/app/files/public/70e60580-78ef-49a1-b677-c1546751d911/2024%20MGMC%20Price%20List%20070124%20rev%20072624.pdf>

⁴ See fn. 1.

⁵ <https://www.maine.gov/dhhs/sites/maine.gov.dhhs/files/inline-files/BRAP%20Pause%20Public%20Notification%203.21.25.pdf>