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THE MAINE SENATE
132nd Legislature

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Testimony of Senator Rachel Talbot Ross introducing
LD 1029, “An Act to Ensure General Assistance for Housing Does Not Reduce Assistance for Other Basic Necessities and to Increase Presumptive Eligibility and State Reimbursement for General Assistance”

Before the Joint Standing Committee on Health and Human Services
April 7, 2025

Senator Ingwersen, Representative Meyer, and Honorable Colleagues on the Health and Human Services Committee, I am Senator Rachel Talbot Ross. I represent Senate District 28, which includes part of my hometown of Portland and Peaks Island.

Thank you for the opportunity to present LD 1029, “*An Act to Ensure General Assistance for Housing Does Not Reduce Assistance for Other Basic Necessities and to Increase Presumptive Eligibility and State Reimbursement for General Assistance.*” I want to thank the cosponsors of this bill for their support of these critical changes to the General Assistance (GA) Program and extend deep appreciation to Committee Chairs Senator Ingwersen and Representative Meyer for their leadership, and to this committee for its commitment to bettering Maine’s safety net which allows Maine’s most vulnerable to meet their basic needs.

LD 1029 would make only three changes to GA, yet these changes would greatly assist Maine in addressing and ending homelessness.

1. Increase GA reimbursement from 70 to 90 percent.

First, the bill would increase GA reimbursement from 70 to 90 percent. This would allow people to be served successfully in their home communities. This is because the financial burden caused by the current reimbursement rate is too large a barrier for most municipalities to overcome. As such, far too often, we see people leaving their natural support systems in their communities of origin to access resources in large service-center communities. When people leave their natural support systems, they are more likely to require additional public resources to meet their basic needs. Increasing the reimbursement rate to 90% will allow all municipal General Assistance Programs throughout Maine improved financial capacity, which would not only be effective, but also most efficient.

Increasing the GA reimbursement rate is critical and a priority for many advocates in Maine, as evidenced by the numerous bills that would accomplish this, not only this session, but in previous Legislatures. However, we will continue to see our emergency shelters full, overflowing or turning people away, underfunded, and at serious risk of closing, unless the other aspects of this bill are enacted.

2. Ensure GA for housing does not reduce assistance for other basic necessities.

With rents across Maine steadily rising, rental assistance all too often consumes a person's entire GA maximum eligibility. It is important that GA is available to pay for housing while also allowing sufficient ability to meet other basic necessities, such as food, non-food, diapers, and prescriptions. Maine's most vulnerable populations need adequate access to safety net resources and assistance with housing through GA, especially with MaineHousing's Section 8 (Housing Choice Voucher) Program being frozen for months at the direction of HUD with no end in sight. Because of the shortage of rental vouchers in Maine currently, rental assistance granted through GA is the primary way in which emergency shelters and front-line staff are moving people from homelessness into housing.

Food, water, clothing, shelter, and sleep are the bare necessities for a human being's survival. It is imperative that if people need to use the maximum amount of their GA eligibility to pay rent, they maintain eligibility for other categories of essential assistance so that they can meet their basic human needs.

3. Increase the period of presumptive eligibility for GA for a person who is provided shelter in an emergency shelter from 30 days to 180 days.

Increasing the GA period of presumptive eligibility for a person who is in an emergency homeless shelter from 30 to 180 days would allow municipalities to pay for emergency shelter for people in need and prevent unsheltered homelessness.

As Members of this Committee likely know from previous testimony I submitted this Session, Maine's emergency shelter network is in crisis. Stagnant funding and record-high homelessness have left providers running unsustainable deficits. State funding for emergency shelter operations has remained unchanged since 2016 despite rising costs and demand.

To put this in context, in 2014, the total state share of funding for the Emergency Shelter and Housing Assistance Program (ESHAP) was just \$365,000. Recognizing the growing need, the Legislature raised it to \$2.5 million in 2016 – but it has remained flat ever since. Meanwhile, the demand for shelter beds has surged, while providers have been forced to rely on unstable funding sources.

Accordingly, emergency shelters are currently operating at large annual deficits. Without additional funding allocations, emergency shelters in Maine will close – some imminently. Simply put, Maine's emergency shelters are in a funding crisis. Extending presumptive eligibility to 180 days lays the groundwork for a reliable, functional shelter funding mechanism, which has been missing and profoundly needed for years. This bill will solve this crisis and prevent us from facing others every year.

Shelters are lifelines. Shelters provide not just temporary safe housing but crucial support to help individuals achieve stability. Research shows that people experiencing unsheltered homelessness are at significantly higher risk of physical illness, mental health crises, substance use disorders, trauma, and death compared to those in shelters.

If Maine's emergency shelters are forced to reduce their services due to lack of funding, more individuals will be left without options, meaning people will land outside. This will also place increasing strain on emergency rooms, law enforcement, and social services. These are far costlier and far less humane alternatives.

Since the last ESHAP increase in 2016, the lack of affordable housing has driven up the average length of a shelter stay by 59%. While permanent housing is the ultimate solution, we must sustain our limited shelter beds now to prevent immediate harm. Extending presumptive eligibility for shelter stays to 180 days will be a huge step forward.

The Legislature has had opportunities to make these critical changes to GA, yet previous attempts have not come to fruition. We cannot afford another missed opportunity.

I urge you to support and fully fund all three aspects of LD 1029. Maine will be better off having an improved General Assistance program that effectively and efficiently serves people in dire need. Maine cannot afford the financial and human consequences of not enacting this bill.

Sincerely,

Rachel Talbot Ross
State Senator, District 28
Representing part of Portland and Peaks Island