



Rachel Talbot Ross
Senator, District 28

THE MAINE SENATE
132nd Legislature

3 State House Station
Augusta, Maine 04333

Testimony of Senator Rachel Talbot Ross introducing
**LD 1910, An Act to Strengthen Housing Stability Services by Increasing Support
and Outreach**
Before the Joint Standing Committee on Housing and Economic Development
May 12, 2025

Senator Curry, Representative Gere, and Honorable Colleagues on the Housing and Economic Development Committee, my name is 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 1910, "An Act to Strengthen Housing Stability Services by Increasing Support and Outreach."

I want to thank the cosponsors of this bill for their support of these critical housing stability worker and outreach caseworker positions and again extend my deep appreciation to Committee Chairs Senator Curry and Representative Gere for their leadership and to this Committee for its commitment to bettering our most vulnerable populations as we collectively work to end and prevent homelessness on Maine.

LD 1910 would direct the Department of Health and Human Services to contract with community-based nonprofit organizations with experience in outreach, engagement, and social service delivery to individuals and families experiencing homelessness to hire outreach caseworkers and housing stability workers to work with individuals who are unhoused or experience chronic homelessness by cycling through emergency settings such as shelters, jails, hospitals, and warming centers. These critical positions will assist individuals in attaining permanent housing, ensure ongoing support services once the individuals are housed, and ensure that unhoused individuals are in safe indoor spaces provided by emergency shelters while housing is being secured. Importantly, these contracted positions would be distributed throughout the State to ensure coverage for all of Maine's nine homeless services hubs.

Enacting LD 1910 is vital for Maine's homeless response system.

Prior to 2011, there were some 56 Intensive Case Managers (ICMs) employed by DHHS serving populations experiencing chronic homelessness in sheltered and unsheltered settings. These were a combination of Community-based ICMs and Forensic ICMs. Although ICMs worked with the same populations and their employment followed the same principles outlined in this legislation, part of each ICM's job was to address crises as they emerged around the state, diverting them from their primary service to the target population. These positions were cut in the 2011 budget. Later, some Forensic ICMs were rehired, but they and Community-based ICMs were never fully replenished, and now the total stands at 24 positions statewide, with only 5 of them being Community-based. This bill proposes a



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targeted strategy to address the shortage of ICMs in Maine and will help us end and prevent homelessness.

These positions are critical because they would provide continuity of housing efforts for a population that tends to bounce through various emergency settings so that housing efforts steadily continue no matter where the person served happens to be (shelter, jail, hospital, warming center, outside, various other shelters, etc.).

I have become familiar with the FUSE (Frequent Users System Engagement) Committee, an initiative in Portland that has been working on a by-name list effort to house people who are chronically homeless, people who are unsheltered, people who are frequent users of emergency systems – people in need of permanent supportive housing interventions. This group of 20 organizations has been working to end homelessness for this population for more than 10 years and has now housed 528 people with success rates between 85 and 95% throughout the 10-year effort. Members of this Committee are experts in their respective fields and have found that there is a correlation between the success rate once housed and the presence of follow-up support services: when services continue to follow this population once housed, their success rates have been quite high (95%); when housing stability services are lacking success rates have been markedly lower (85%). As of the end of March 2025, the success rate in housing is 85.44%, indicative of insufficient housing stability services. However, the slow pace of housing is also evidence of the lack of continuity of effort. There are people on these lists who remain unhoused after more than 10 years. This bill would not only provide critical staff to help house these individuals, but it would also ensure that they remain stable once housed, the current missing link. This is imperative not only for this critical initiative but for numerous communities throughout Maine.

This Committee has also collected and analyzed jail and hospital utilization data for people who were unhoused versus people who had been housed through the initiative. This comprehensive data is quite compelling. It also demonstrates that getting people housed creates cost savings for local, county, and state governments.

As of the end of March 2025, out of the 448 people housed and still alive, not a single person was in jail, and two people were in the hospital. Out of the 144 people unhoused, 14 people were in jail, and four people were in the hospital. This means that in March, for this population, the likelihood of being in jail was infinitely higher when unhoused than when housed, and this population was more than 6 times more likely to be in the hospital when unhoused than when housed. Throughout the forty-nine (49) months this data has been collected and analyzed, it has been discovered that people who are chronically homeless are up to 29 times more likely to be in the hospital and up to 57 times more likely to be in jail



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when unhoused than when housed. This data is indicative of the stability that housing, coupled with adequate follow-up support services, provides. When people attain stable housing, they are exponentially less likely to interact with our overburdened and costly emergency systems. That means we save money. It is 27 times more expensive to be in the hospital and 4 times more expensive to be in jail than in housing. The key to attaining and retaining housing for this population is housing stability and outreach caseworker services. The cost of maintaining the status quo far exceeds the cost for the positions that this bill would create.

Too often, our system works in silos. As the data above shows, it is common for a person to land in jail, the hospital, various homeless shelters, outside in a tent or encampment, and to have contact with medical and law enforcement first responders frequently. It is extremely difficult to house someone in those circumstances. Outreach Case workers and Housing Stability workers have the sole focus on sticking with a person no matter where they land in the system, maintaining the continuity of efforts to house the person, and then, importantly, working to keep them housed. Maine's homeless response system is missing these essential positions to provide continuity and correct the deficits of a disconnected system. The efficiencies created by these positions will also inevitably pay financial dividends.

Maine's shelters are full because there is little movement into housing. When shelters are full, they often have no choice but to turn vulnerable people away. This leads to increases in unsheltered homelessness and encampments – the worst of all outcomes for everyone. By adding skilled services, Maine can work to empty its shelters and encampments, housing and stabilizing each person, freeing up capacity within our emergency shelters, and preventing encampments.

Maine has experienced unprecedented numbers of people who are unsheltered or in encampments in recent years throughout the entire state. Our state's best strategy for moving people to safe places indoors or directly into housing from encampments is to add outreach case workers who are trained to meet people where they're at to solve their homelessness. And Maine cannot afford the consequences and cost of continued encampments.

In addition to the costs borne by the State associated with homelessness and encampments, we must also consider the expensive and deadly health outcomes: According to 2023 state overdose data, 73 people died of overdoses within the homeless population versus 533 who died of overdoses within the 1.395 million population of Maine. That meant that a person was 32 times more likely to die of a fatal overdose if unhoused than if housed. People are more likely to die of a fatal overdose in an encampment than they are in a supervised shelter. Encampments create other problems beyond a much higher risk of overdose, including trauma.



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Encampments are desolate, hopeless places where people who do not feel good about themselves take enormous risks. People are more apathetic about living when they are in these kinds of desperate circumstances, and that affects their decision-making and has health consequences. People are more likely to participate in risky behaviors that can lead to contracting dangerous and potentially lifelong illnesses, such as Hepatitis C and HIV, when in an encampment than they are in a supervised shelter.

In 2024, 14 people in the entrenched Bangor encampment contracted HIV, and that same group of 14 also contracted Hepatitis C. According to state DHHS data, it costs \$30,000 for a one-time Hepatitis C treatment – a generally successful cure for Hepatitis C. The treatment for HIV is \$36,000 annually in perpetuity. The first year of treatment alone will cost the equivalent of 6 years of housing for each person, yet instead of paying for housing, we will be paying to keep them alive while unhoused. We will be paying for the consequences of them not being housed.

This Administration and the Legislature have made important investments in housing and ending homelessness. However, the current situation is dire, and the creation of these positions to house and keep this population housed is vital.

I implore this Committee and the Legislature to enact LD 1910 to ensure Maine's homeless service system has outreach case workers and housing stability workers – currently the missing link – to get people into housing and ensure they are successful there. 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