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MEJ Testimony in *Support* of LD 1959, An Act to Prohibit the Department of Health and Human Services from Reducing General Assistance Reimbursement Maximum for Payment of Costs of Providing Emergency Shelter

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Senator Ingwersen, Representative Meyer and members of the Health and Human Services Committee. My name is Dina Malual (she/hers) and I am a Policy Advocate with Maine Equal Justice (MEJ), a nonprofit legal aid provider working to increase economic security, opportunity, and equity for people in Maine. We are pleased to testify in strong support of LD 1959.

As shelters struggle to remain open and as the single shelter in York County is closing after 45 years of operation, legislation that grants shelters the flexibility to meet their financial needs via GA reimbursement is needed more than ever. LD 1959 reverses a GA rule that reduced reimbursement for shelters and prohibits the Department of Health and Human Services (DHHS) from adopting any rule reducing or otherwise restricting GA maximum levels for emergency shelters that are more restrictive than limits established in statute.

GA Rule #26 set reimbursement to equal the 0-bedroom heated rate for emergency shelters. Prior to this rule change, shelters could receive GA reimbursements as allowed by municipal ordinance even if it was higher than the 0-bedroom heated rate. This new limit often does not reflect the actual costs of providing emergency shelter. This rule change does not support shelters; it makes it harder for them to remain open, which is especially problematic during a housing crisis affecting individuals and families of all ages.

We want to note that this rule change purports to implement the changes in general assistance law that resulted from the passage of LD 1732 in the 131st Legislature that made several changes to the GA program.¹ However, the change in

¹ <https://www.mainelegislature.org/legis/bills/getPDF.asp?paper=HP1111&item=3&snum=131>

reimbursement rate included in GA Rule #26 was not part of LD 1732. This change is also not supported by any other provision of the assistance statute.

Not only is the Emergency Shelter section of Rule #26 contrary to law, it has had significant fiscal effects on many shelters across the state. We are disappointed that such a change bypassed the Legislature and are glad to see preventative measures to ensure substantive changes like this do not happen without appropriate review by the Legislature.

LD 1959 reverses a portion of Rule #26 and sets guardrails to prevent restrictive changes beyond what is in current law.

Shelters are the ultimate safety net for people who become unhoused. Utilizing GA to help pay for the costs associated with housing individuals and families - often serving people from many different communities - will be negatively affected if the recent Emergency Shelter change in Rule #26 remains.

LD 1959 financially supports shelters and corrects Rule #26. For these reasons, we ask the committee to vote in support of this bill.