

Testimony In Support of LD 2124
An Act to Support Emergency Shelter Funding
Using Revenue from the Real Estate Transfer Tax
Kari Bradstreet, Executive Director - Homeless Services of Aroostook

Senator Curry, Representative Gere, and members of the Committee on Housing and Economic Development, my name is Kari Bradstreet, Executive Director of Homeless Services of Aroostook (HSA) which operates northern Maine's only general emergency homeless shelter and overnight warming center in Presque Isle. While we serve folks from all over Maine, our clients are predominantly local Aroostook County residents. They are our neighbors—seeking warmth, safety, stability, and a path back to housing. It is with them in mind that I am here today in strong support of LD 2124.

A regional lifeline in a vast, rural county: Aroostook County is geographically larger than some U.S. states and is the largest County east of the Mississippi, yet HSA provides The County's only emergency homeless shelter for the general public – providing 57 beds - and during winter, operates the only overnight warming center north of Bangor, providing roughly 1,000 bed-nights with an average of 8–12 people nightly. When our beds are full or the weather turns dangerous, the next closest general shelter is hours away, often in Bangor. This distance can amount to several hours or more travel time for some residents in our region depending on origin and road conditions.

And that distance is not just an inconvenience; it is a risk—especially for families, older adults, and people with medical needs who cannot safely undertake long travel in winter. And for those seeking to stabilize and remain in or near their home communities – close to families, job opportunities, local schools and more – that distance can be devastating.

What we do: HSA opened in 1984 as a high-barrier shelter; but we have since added a low-barrier program (2019), a seasonal overnight warming shelter (2022), and unsheltered outreach (2024)—deliberate expansions to meet real need in The County and do more than triage crises. In the most recent pre-LD 698 snapshot provided to this Committee, our ~\$770,000 annual operating budget covered housing, food, 24/7 staffing, navigation, and facility maintenance with which we sheltered 216 adults and 28 children, served 90 people in the warming center, launched outreach, and helped 79 residents access permanent housing. Yet less than \$219,000 of that budget came from the state via MaineHousing's emergency shelter and housing assistance program (known as ESHAP) operating funds which have remained stagnant since 2016. Those figures tell a clear story: the need has grown, costs have risen, services have evolved—but base operating support has not kept pace.

The structural funding gap—one-time fixes aren't enough: Across Maine, shelters have had to rely on unpredictable philanthropy, small grants, municipal appeals, and short-term funding stopgaps. As an example, in spring 2025, HSA sought a \$150,000 bridge loan from the City of Presque Isle just to avoid cutting core services while awaiting action on LD 698. We also asked towns across The County for a voluntary \$2-per-resident contribution, but fewer than half participated.

When LD 698 ultimately passed and was funded for one year as an emergency, we called it “the breath of life we needed”—providing a lifeline that raised the rate temporarily from about \$7 to \$18 of the estimated \$100 it costs to provide nightly shelter. For HSA, this funding allowed us to stabilize through the winter and pay back the loan from our town. And while we remain grateful—a single breath does not equal a ventilator. One-time help cannot fill the ongoing and growing gap we face in order sustain the 24/7 staffing, utilities, food, outreach and navigation work that keep vulnerable people safe and move them into housing.

LD 2124 dedicates a small, ongoing share of the recent increase in Maine’s real estate transfer tax to ESHAP funded shelter operations across Maine, creating a stable revenue stream that shelters can budget around and rely on. And it reflects the regional and statewide nature of emergency shelter services—with approximately 40 shelters serving all of Maine’s 16 counties and 480 plus municipalities. For those of us in The County, this modest increase in stable, reliable funding means the difference between a functioning regional safety net and a dangerous gap measured in miles, snowstorms, crises and ambulance runs.

What happens if HSA closes: Simply put - there is no nearby backstop. Families, older Mainers, veterans, and other vulnerable community members in the most rural part of our state will face heartbreaking decisions between making hours-long trips to the next closest (likely full) shelter, or staying outdoors, in vehicles, or in unsafe, substandard situations. And local police, jails, emergency departments, and municipal programs will bear immediate, higher-cost burdens – as we saw when York County’s only adult shelter closed last May, displacing residents and adding stress to already overburdened systems across southern Maine and the state.

We have tightened costs, leveraged municipal and county contacts, and pursued private donations—but this patchwork of dollars can’t anchor what is effective public safety infrastructure for northern Maine. A durable state operating base is the only responsible way to protect both people and local budgets. HSA is committed to serving our community. We remain committed to doing everything in our power to address and ending homelessness in Maine – but we require the stability that LD 2124 would provide so we can focus on what we do best.

Thank you for your time and attention to all aspects of Maine’s housing continuum and for supporting the safety and dignity of all Maine people. I respectfully urge you to vote Ought to Pass on LD 2124.