

February 20, 2026

Senator ~~Stennan~~ <sup>Rotundo</sup>, Representative Gattine, and Distinguished Members of the Appropriations and Financial Affairs Committee.

My name is Grace Valenzuela, and I serve with Portland Public Schools, where I manage and provide direct oversight for the implementation and fiscal stewardship of our student homelessness prevention grants. Thank you for the opportunity to testify today, and thank you to the members of this Legislature who have supported efforts to prevent homelessness among families with school-aged children.

I would like to begin by expressing sincere gratitude for your leadership in advancing LD 384 and LD 747. These bills recognized an essential truth: housing stability is foundational to student success.

LD 384, sponsored by Joseph Rafferty, established the Student Homelessness Prevention Program (PHAP) and was administered through the Maine Department of Education. This legislation created a fund allowing school districts to provide up to \$750 per student per year to families at risk of losing housing for rental assistance, utilities, or necessary repairs. Portland Public Schools received \$586,011.46 across two grant cycles beginning in July 2023 and concluding in March of this year.

LD 747, the Student Homelessness Prevention Pilot (SHoPP), administered through MaineHousing, allocated \$2 million statewide. Portland received \$854,629.43—the largest award among the five participating school districts in February 2025.

Together, these two grants provided direct stabilization assistance to 829 households and 1772 students in Portland. Each number represents a family that avoided eviction, a child who remained in their school of origin, and a household that did not enter emergency shelter. Because of these funds, we were able to intervene early—before displacement occurred.

From an educational perspective, the impact has been measurable and profound. Students whose housing remained stable demonstrated improved attendance, greater academic engagement, and stronger social-emotional regulation. When children are not worried about where they will sleep, they are better able to focus, build relationships, and learn. Prevention is not only compassionate—it is educationally strategic and fiscally responsible.

However, as we look toward the coming fiscal year, neither LD 384 nor LD 747 currently has an appropriation.

At this moment in Maine, housing instability remains at crisis levels. Families face extremely limited housing availability and rental costs that continue to outpace wages. In Portland, we are seeing sustained—and in some cases increasing—requests for assistance. Without continued funding, schools will lose one of the only flexible, rapid-response tools available to prevent student homelessness before it happens.

The absence of appropriation does not reflect a lack of need; rather, it risks reversing progress made possible by this Legislature's foresight. Preventing homelessness is far less costly than responding to it after displacement has occurred. When students lose housing, the costs ripple across education systems, social services, and emergency shelters. These grants allowed us to stabilize families quickly, efficiently, and with documented accountability.

I respectfully urge this Committee to include funding for these programs in the biennial budget. Housing stability supports attendance, academic achievement, and social-emotional well-being. If we are serious about improving educational outcomes in Maine, we must ensure that children have a safe and stable place to live.

Thank you for your leadership and for your continued commitment to Maine's children and families. I would be happy to answer any questions.

Respectfully,



Grace Valenzuela