



CITY OF BANGOR

Testimony of Jennifer Gunderman, City of Bangor, Public Health and Community Services

Before the

Appropriations & Financial Affairs Committee

**in Opposition to the Sec. S-1. 22 MRSA §4308, sub-§1-A limiting housing assistance through
General Assistance**

January 23, 2025

Senator Rotundo, Representative Gattine, and distinguished members of the Appropriations and Financial Affairs Committee. My name is Jennifer Gunderman, Director of Bangor Public Health and Community Services, and I'm providing testimony on behalf of the City of Bangor in opposition to LD 209 Part S, Limit on Housing Assistance.

There is little doubt that housing accounts for the greatest proportion of General Assistance expenditures. Some of my most seasoned GA caseworkers, one of whom has been with us for over thirty years, remarked that she has never seen the rental increases we've experienced in recent years. Single room rentals that were \$300-\$400 several years ago now cost as much as clients used to pay for one- and two-bedroom apartments. We're constantly telling new and existing clients that they need to find housing within their means but, the reality is, such housing no longer exists.

Our GA clients are held to high standards when it comes to applying for and receiving assistance. If they are able bodied, they are expected to prove they are seeking work each month. For some, employment comes quickly and they no longer need GA within a relatively short period of time. For others, particularly those with felony convictions, finding employment is extremely difficult because they invariably fail the background check required by most employers. We have many clients who are in the process of applying for social security. Although these individuals will be exempted from the three-month limit, we will continue to require that they provide documentation from their medical provider supporting their social security application.

We are extremely concerned about this proposed legislation which we believe raises more questions than it answers. For the past several years, the State has demonstrated its commitment to ending homelessness through both policies and appropriations. Now, the State seems to be changing course with legislation that, in all likelihood, will increase the number of individuals and families experiencing homelessness in Maine. My main concern today is the State's ability to answer the questions outlined below:

1. Bangor is home to 18 Sober Living Residences (SLR) with a combined total of 163 beds. A large percentage of these SLR residents come directly from the corrections system. In many cases, it is a requirement of Drug Court. Most SLR have restrictions on work during a resident's early months as they are to be focusing on their recovery. For some, Drug Court prohibits them from working. Even when they are cleared to work, a history of felony convictions makes finding employment a challenge. How will these individuals maintain their hard-earned sobriety

if they are forced onto the streets in three months because they are not yet working and can't pay their rent?

2. There is an astonishing lack of family shelter beds around the state. Some of our long-term clients who are seeking work are struggling because they can't find childcare or they can't find work that will enable them to get by without assistance from GA. How will the State take care of families displaced by eviction?
3. Hotel stays paid for by GA are primarily reserved for people who are dealing with a crisis and have high risk needs. What is the rationale for continuing to pay for people to stay in costly hotels while limiting GA housing assistance to those who currently have stable housing for themselves and their families?
4. GA is often spoken of as the program of last resort. However, with the Section 8, BRAP, the Eviction Prevention Program, STEP, and the McKinney Vento programs currently on hold due to lack of funding, we are the only program left standing. Where are people to go if GA can't help them?
5. Landlords often enter into agreements with GA because they know it can be a consistent source of rent. Despite the fact it's not legal, will they not start to refuse GA clients because they're afraid the rental assistance will dry up in 3 months?
6. Our shelter beds are currently full, and far too many people are living in cars and on the streets. Won't this legislation drive more people toward shelters?
7. How do we keep track and enforce this legislation? There is currently no statewide tracking system for General Assistance, and it will be nearly impossible for local municipalities to know if an applicant has been provided rental assistance in another community.

We hope that these questions will help you to understand the significant impact that LD 209 Part S would have on the people of Maine. There have been significant strides in Maine to address homelessness with a comprehensive approach. General Assistance is one tool that gets and keeps people housed. LD 209 Part S risks people's housing and the state's efforts to decrease homelessness.