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**Testimony of Representative Kristen Cloutier  
in support of LD 1478, An Act To Decriminalize Homelessness  
Before the Joint Standing Committee on Criminal Justice and Public Safety**

Senator Deschambault, Representative Warren and distinguished members of the Criminal Justice and Public Safety Committee, my name is Kristen Cloutier and I proudly represent House District 60, part of my hometown of Lewiston. I am happy to submit testimony in support of **LD 1478, An Act To Decriminalize Homelessness**.

Prior to the pandemic, Maine's homeless population had already reached a crisis point. On any given night, roughly 2,500 people experience homelessness in our state. According to the National Alliance to End Homelessness, Maine's rate of homelessness is nearly double the rate of other Northeastern states, including New Hampshire, Rhode Island and Connecticut.

In our society, people experiencing homelessness are far more likely to have contact with the criminal justice system than people who are housed. Additionally, we do not currently have systems in place to adequately care for members of Maine's homeless population in need of emergency response services related to mental illness or substance use disorder. This lack of resources coupled with a lack of privacy has resulted in above-average rates of contact with law enforcement and incarceration.

Every day activities that you and I take for granted, such as sleeping, standing outside in the sunshine, or enjoying an alcoholic beverage, are all subject to scrutiny and criminalization to those without a house or home. As a result, many members of our homeless population end up with charges on their permanent records that further prevent them from obtaining housing or employment, creating a vicious cycle of homelessness and poverty, and doing nothing to connect them to the services they so desperately need.

This bill would require that mental health and substance use disorder professionals, trained in crisis response, accompany law enforcement officers on calls to situations involving homeless individuals, so that they might provide appropriate information and referrals to resources in the community, including crisis services, transitional housing, and case management services.

We know that more successful and sustainable outcomes can be achieved with a public health, rather than a criminal justice approach, and that access to direct services is much less expensive than incarceration. It is the most humane response we can provide to those struggling to survive.

Thank you for your consideration.