

May 14, 2021

I am for the proposed legislation of LD 1478 - An Act To Decriminalize Homelessness" My name is Mary Cook, LMSW-cc and I am a licensed clinical social worker in Maine. I have served folks experiencing homelessness for the past 11 years.

I would like to share a story about an individual that for the purposes of this letter we will call "Frank". Frank experienced unsheltered homelessness and camped out in the Greater Portland area for 4 years, that is 4 harsh Maine winter's sleeping in a tent with access to bathroom, showers, a place to charge a phone or consistent community. During his time experiencing homelessness he had police involvement for things like trespassing, loitering, public drinking, etc. All things that most people experiencing homelessness receive violations for, all things that if this person had a home of his own he would not be doing in public. These charges repeatedly prevented him from being awarded housing. Landlords would look at his recent criminal background and make assumptions about his character. After working with Frank for a full year we finally were able to have an appeal with a property management company. We submitted letters of support from his providers advocating that his charges were not going to impact his ability to be a good tenant and neighbor but just that he was victim to the criminalization of homelessness. Thankfully, he was approved for this apartment and I am happy to report has lived there for the past 2 years.

This was a happy outcome to this story, but this is in no way a unique story to the barriers that folks experiencing homelessness face due to the criminalization of homelessness. I also work under a clinical lens in my current role serving folks who experience unsheltered homelessness. It is crucial that we pass this legislation to stop the trauma and re-traumatization that especially Black, Indigenous and People of Color experience with unnecessary police involvement and incarceration while also navigating homelessness. We must replace our systems with person centered, trauma informed and harm reduction centered models not criminalization. We are failing as communities and a State if we are penalizing people who do not have access to the basic human right of housing. We can do better, and we must. Please, pass LD 1478- An Act to Decriminalize Homelessness."

Thank you for your time,

Mary Cook, LMSW-cc

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Kennebunk, ME 04043

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508-274-6645

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Kennebunk

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