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Good afternoon, Senator Curry, Representative Gere, and members of the Committee on Housing and Economic Development,

My name is Terence Miller, and I am the Advocacy Director at Preble Street. Preble Street operates 16 programs throughout Maine, and its staff works daily alongside hundreds of individuals and families who struggle with housing insecurity. Our mission is to provide accessible, barrier-free services to empower people experiencing problems with homelessness, housing, hunger, and poverty and advocate for solutions to these problems.

Preble Street strongly supports LD 698, An Act to Sustain Emergency Homeless Shelters in Maine. This bill would help our state's homeless shelters stay open by providing an additional \$5 million through the ESHAP Shelter Operating Subsidy.

Our state faces a housing crisis, and emergency shelters are on the front lines. Even though expanded permanent housing is the long-term solution to our situation, it is critical to maintain our scarce shelter beds until additional housing can be constructed. The three individuals with lived experience expressively testified during the hearing, demonstrating how shelters played a crucial role in their housing journey.

Preble Street works closely with the Cumberland County Sheriff's Office to support individuals experiencing homelessness who become involved in the criminal justice system. As noted in the testimony of Brian Pellerin, Chief Deputy at the Cumberland County Sheriff's Office, "If shelters are forced to close, encampments will likely reemerge. And people may end up in our county jails. Jails should not be our de facto homeless shelters."

We know that individuals experiencing homelessness are less likely to access vital services like housing navigation or healthcare when they are sleeping outside instead of staying at a shelter. With the stability of a roof over their head, a person experiencing homelessness can focus their energy on rebuilding their life instead of thinking about where they are going to sleep each night.

Throughout our 50 years of serving individuals experiencing housing insecurity across Maine, Preble Street has seen the critical role that emergency shelters play. Without them, many Mainers facing homelessness would be left with no option but to sleep outside or in places not meant for human habitation.

Preble Street urges the Housing and Economic Development Committee to protect this vital resource by supporting LD 698.

Thank you for your consideration.

50 years of turning hunger and homelessness into opportunity and hope