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February 10, 2026

Re: LD 2124 An Act to Support Emergency Shelter Funding Using Revenue from the Real Estate Transfer Tax

Senator Curry, Representative Gere, and members of the Housing and Economic Development Committee, my name is Vickey Merrill, and I serve as Advocacy Director for Community Housing of Maine, a statewide nonprofit dedicated to developing affordable housing and advancing policies that strengthen housing stability and inclusive communities across Maine.

I am testifying in strong support of LD 2124, that provides additional, sustainable funding for emergency shelters in Maine.

Emergency shelters are a critical public service, yet they rely on a patchwork of funding sources that—even when combined—do not cover the true cost of providing shelter. Over the past several years, Maine has the homeless response system in response to growing need, but the funding supporting emergency shelters has not kept pace. As a result, already-insufficient resources have been stretched dangerously thin.

For years, shelters have lacked the staffing and operational funding necessary to safely meet demand. Today, Maine's shelter system is in crisis. Shelters across the state are full, overflowing, and regularly turning people away. Many are operating at substantial annual deficits that, collectively, total in the millions. Without additional funding, shelters will close. Some are already on the brink.

Maine is experiencing a homelessness crisis. Last month, 4,375 people were reported experiencing homelessness across the state's nine Homeless Response Hubs. Over the past 22 months of hub data, there has been only one month in which more people exited homelessness than entered. This imbalance is why shelters are at and exceeding capacity.

Hundreds of people are still sleeping outside across Maine, despite years of effort to bring people indoors. The 2025 Point-in-Time count identified 281 people experiencing unsheltered homelessness statewide—the second-highest unsheltered count Maine has ever recorded. Maine cannot afford the human, social, or public costs of allowing encampments to grow.

If Maine loses shelter capacity, the consequences are immediate and unavoidable: unsheltered homelessness and encampments will grow—rapidly and visibly. We experienced this in 2023, and we are once again on the precipice. Our shelters are full and beginning to overflow. If doors close or beds are lost, people will have no option but to sleep outside.

The standard should be clear: everyone should have access to housing, and when housing is not immediately available, access to shelter with professional services that help people move toward housing. Encampments are not good for cities or towns. Access to shelter and housing is.

A robust, adequately funded shelter system is the foundation of Maine's homelessness response system. When shelters have sufficient capacity, communities can shift from



managing life-threatening crises outdoors to doing what works: housing people and keeping them housed. It is extraordinarily difficult to help someone navigate housing applications, documentation, and appointments when they are living outside and focused solely on surviving each day and night. Emergency shelters provide safety, stability, and a platform from which people can engage in the complicated work of getting housed.

This matters not only for human outcomes, but for public systems and public costs. People who are chronically homeless are up to 29 times more likely to be hospitalized and 57 times more likely to be incarcerated than when they are housed. Hospital stays are 27 times more expensive, and jail stays four times more expensive, than housing.

The health consequences of unsheltered homelessness are particularly severe. According to 2024 state data, 67 people experiencing homelessness died of overdoses, compared to 423 deaths among Maine's housed population of 1.401 million. This means a person was 47 times more likely to die of a fatal overdose if unhoused than if housed. People are also far more likely to die of overdose in encampments than in supervised shelters.

Encampments increase risk well beyond overdose. People living in encampments face heightened risk of violence, exploitation, and victimization, including trafficking and coercion, due to isolation, instability, and lack of safe alternatives. They are traumatic, destabilizing environments that compound stress and uncertainty, increasing the likelihood of risky behaviors that result in serious, lifelong illness. In 2024, 14 people living in an entrenched Bangor encampment contracted both HIV and Hepatitis C. According to DHHS data, a one-time Hepatitis C treatment costs \$30,000, while HIV treatment costs approximately \$36,000 per year, for life. These are preventable outcomes—and preventable costs—when people have access to shelter and services.

LD 2124 offers a responsible, long-term solution by creating a stable funding source for emergency shelters. It strengthens the Shelter Operating Subsidy Program and provides shelters with a financially viable path forward allowing them to keep their doors open, retain staff, and safely serve Maine's most vulnerable residents.

This Administration and Legislature have made important investments in housing and homelessness response, and I thank you for that leadership. The additional financial support previously appropriated for emergency shelters was a critically needed stopgap; however, Maine needs a stable, long-term solution to shelter funding. And the current situation is urgent. Without immediate and sustained action, Maine will see increased encampments, higher public costs, and devastating human consequences.

I urge you to support LD 2124, along with any legislative initiative that provides additional shelter funding, so emergency shelters across Maine can continue to operate—now and into the future—and so we can work together to end and prevent homelessness statewide.

Thank you for your time and consideration.