



HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

2 STATE HOUSE STATION
AUGUSTA, MAINE 04333-0002

(207) 287-1400

TTY: Maine Relay 711

Victoria Morales

P.O. Box 2404

South Portland, ME 04116

Cell: (207) 216-0643

victoria.morales@legislature.maine.gov

March 24, 2021

Testimony of Rep. Victoria Morales presenting

LD 475, Resolve, To Create the Frequent Users System Engagement Collaborative

Before the Joint Standing Committee on Health and Human Services

Senator Claxton, Representative Meyer, and esteemed members of the Joint Standing Committee on Health and Human Services, my name is Victoria Morales, and I represent House District 33 in South Portland. I am proud to sponsor **LD 473, An Act to Create the Maine Rental Assistance and Voucher Guarantee Program.**

It is no longer news that Maine is experiencing a homelessness crisis, which we all know stems from an affordable housing crisis and a services desert for our most vulnerable people. Fortunately, there is growing support in each of our 16 counties to address these issues and provide the support services so many people need. This will take some time to put in place, and more importantly, to do it right, it will take coordination.

That's where FUSE comes in. FUSE stands for the Frequent Users Systems Engagement Collaborative. It is about process, and bringing all stakeholders to the table to make sure we are creating the best most efficient policy to improve outcomes for people who are chronically homeless in Maine.

FUSE breaks the cycle of homelessness and crisis among individuals with complex behavioral health challenges who are the highest users of our most expensive emergency services by designing a supportive housing framework to stabilize these super utilizers, which in turn increases housing stability and reduces multiple crisis service use. Across the board, data show that, once housed, this population experiences a reduction in shelter usage, a reduction in jail days and reduced recidivism, a reduction in emergency room and hospital use, a reduction of police and rescue contacts, and achieves a housing retention rate of more than 85%. This provides a double win for communities by allowing public systems to cut costs while improving outcomes for some of their most vulnerable community members.

The FUSE model represents an opportunity to transform the homeless, health, and criminal justice systems into one which focuses on increasing housing stability, reducing emergency health care use and recidivism to jail, and breaking the cycle of multiple crisis service use, resulting in public cost offsets.

FUSE will break down silos across homelessness and housing, corrections and policing, and health emergency services by developing a cross-systems approach to planning, collaboration, and ultimately providing housing and community services for Maine individuals who are frequent utilizers of our highest-cost services.

You may be wondering who those stakeholders are. We know that the Statewide Homeless Council, made up of many providers, is always thinking about how to help our homeless population, but what about all the other systems that these folks spend time in? Our police departments, our courtrooms, our jails, our psychiatric hospitals, our emergency rooms. People who are chronically homeless ricochet back and forth between our most expensive emergency systems in a never-ending cycle that keeps them on the streets and utilizing these services with no positive outcomes in their lives.

In preparing for this bill, I spent a lot of time with experts in the field learning about the needs of this population and the evidenced-based proven ways to address them. I also learned that the status quo today is to spend millions of dollars on this population simply because the hard working folks in each of these systems have been in such a crisis mode day to day for many years that they have not had the time and resources to collaborate beyond their own systems to share data, research best practices, and brainstorm solutions.

Last session, the Criminal Justice and Public Safety Committee spent many days in hearings working to solve our jail funding problems. We heard from Sheriffs, prosecutors, public health professionals, and returning citizens about how best to do this work. One important message coming out of those hearings was that our current laws that criminalize substance use result in those suffering from substance use disorder and mental illness ending up in our jails. This population includes a large portion of people who are chronically homeless, people who return to homelessness once they are released from jail.

I encourage you all to read the testimony submitted by Sheriff Troy Morton from Penobscot County, from Sheriff Kevin Joyce from Cumberland County, from DA Jonathan Sahrbeck from Cumberland County. It is time that we bring all informed stakeholders to the table so we can provide a coordinated approach to the services we need. I am a firm believer that no individual sector can solve this problem. It is only through working together, nonprofit, state government, local government, the private sector, our community, that we can do our best work.

I hope you will ask questions of content experts on this topic, like Cullen Ryan from Community Housing of Maine, who can provide very specific details about how and why this effort is needed and why it will work in Maine. Thank you for your consideration.