

March 24<sup>th</sup>, 2021

Good morning Senator Claxton, Representative Meyer, and esteemed members of the Committee on Health and Human Services:

My name is Izzy Ostrowski, and I'm the Maine Hunger Initiative Social Change Advocate at Preble Street, a human services anti-poverty agency with over a dozen programs and services provided across the state. I am here today to testify in support of LD 475: Resolve, To Create the Frequent Users System Engagement Collaborative.

Every day, Preble Street staff witness the toll that homelessness takes on a person: it leads to dramatic increases in physical and mental health problems, feelings of hopelessness and isolation, and increased stigma and discrimination.

People experiencing long-term homelessness end up stuck in a waiting game that only exacerbates these harms. For example, a young man - 24 years old – waited for four years to receive a housing choice voucher. Imagine that. For over four years this young man has been living on the streets, in and out of emergency shelters, jail, and camping. That means that rather than pursuing his goals of education, employment, and recovery – he has spent his time trying to survive and waiting for the needed services to come together at the same time to find stable housing.

We at Preble Street believe that the FUSE collaborative would make a huge difference in assisting those who languish in long term homelessness. FUSE would help identify the people who are the most frequent users of emergency shelters, emergency departments, jails, and prisons and help stabilize them by connecting them to permanent housing. If FUSE were to become a reality, communities would see reductions in psychiatric inpatient hospitalizations, visits to the emergency room, and incarceration. Not only would this bill reduce unnecessary suffering, it would also reduce the financial cost of individuals bouncing from one emergency response system to another. We believe this approach will help move our state toward a more efficient, effective, and humane response to our homelessness crisis.

While the FUSE collaborative would be new to Maine, we have already seen the successes that can be reaped when we prioritize housing our most vulnerable neighbors. When Preble Street opened the first Housing First program in Maine fifteen years ago, it caused the greatest immediate decrease in homelessness in the state of Maine since the data had been tracked. Thirty of the state's most chronically homeless people moved in and the number of people experiencing homelessness dropped and stayed down until the recession hit 4 years later.

The Fuse collaborative will offer a similar opportunity – to help house more people rather than allowing them to stay in a cycle of emergency. Opening the door to stable housing ensures that more people can access the safety, respect, and dignity of living in their own homes.

Tonight, across our state, people will spend the night in emergency shelters or – worse – outside. As a state we can do better: we can make sure that people trapped in the cycle of

homelessness find the support they need to find a place to call home. This is why we ask you to vote in support of LD 475. Thank you.