

Testimony of Chris Bicknell, New Beginnings Inc.
In Support of LD 1076
An Act to Support the Operation of Youth Shelters in Maine

Senator Claxton, Representative Meyer, and members of the Joint Standing Committee on Health and Human Services, thank you for the opportunity to submit this testimony **in support of LD 1076, A Bill to Support the Operation of Youth Shelters in Maine**. I am the Executive Director of New Beginnings; we are an agency that has served homeless youth from across the state for over 40 years. Each year we improve the lives of 700+ youth and families in Maine with shelter, housing, counseling, and outreach services.

Currently there are two types of licensed shelters for youth in Maine. One is a 24-hour shelter known as a “Shelter for Homeless Children” and the other is an overnight shelter known as “Emergency Shelter for Children.” Both are permitted to house youth aged 10-20 years old for up to 30 days. Both also require parental/guardian consent within 72 hours of arrival for youth under the age of 18 to continue to access shelter services beyond the initial 72 hours. LD 1076 addresses several long-standing barriers to supporting youth moving from crisis to stability when they are faced with homelessness in Maine.

Extending the 30-day time limit: The 30-day time limit presents challenges to both juveniles and young adults who access shelter services. Severe family conflict is the reason most youth under 18 experience homelessness for the first time. It is virtually impossible to build the trust and rapport necessary with the youth and their family to engage in family mediation and conflict resolution within 30 days. Unfortunately, this statutory requirement often results in a youth returning home before the family has had the opportunity to develop the skills to avoid conflict and effectively navigate and de-escalate conflict when it arises – setting the youth and family up for inevitable failure. often resulting in a return to shelter or other negative outcomes, and risks to their safety and wellbeing.

The same is also true for youth 18+ for whom a return home may be a safe option, which unfortunately is not always the case. Most youth aged 18-20 years old who are experiencing homelessness need to transition to independent living and move on to self-sufficient young adulthood. Again, 30 days is not enough time to allow these youth to stabilize from the often-traumatic events that precipitated their homelessness, develop the skills to move on to independence, and find affordable, safe, stable housing. **LD 1076 addresses both of these issues by extending the length of stay at both types of shelters for up to 90 days.** This would allow adequate time for family mediation and conflict resolution with families – giving them a chance at success - as well as a window of time for older youth to stabilize, regroup and find appropriate housing. I will add that by allowing the time for families and youth to benefit from the housing stability and the counseling and outreach services also saves the state and towns money in the long run – by countering the need for more costly services down the road.

Extending the 72-hour time limit: We strongly agree that parental/guardian consent is an essential component of supporting youth who are experiencing homelessness and their families to create pathways for a safe return home. A 72-hour time limit to obtain this consent, however, is often a significant barrier for families to access the support they need. As previously mentioned, youth under 18 most often experience homelessness for the first time due to severe family conflict. Because of the duration and severity of these conflicts, parents and guardians are often *initially* unwilling to grant consent for their children to stay at a shelter. Additionally, many families express concern that a shelter stay will result in a child protective report being filed against them and are therefore initially unwilling to provide consent due to that fear. When we are unable to obtain this consent within this short window, most often the child does not return home, but instead seeks shelter in the community. The options for youth at this point are often limited to couch surfing, accepting housing in exchange for sexual favors (survival sex/human trafficking), sleeping in places unfit for human habitation (abandoned buildings, vacant camps etc.), and/or engaging in criminalized activities such as drug trafficking and minor theft (a pathway to life-long, escalating illegal activity) in order to meet their needs.

Extending the time limit for acquiring parental consent for youth under 18 to stay at a shelter would allow for family engagement and trust-building that will lead to a significant increase in family mediation. Once families are aware that the intended outcome of a shelter stay is a return home and resolution of family conflict, and that child protective reports are rare and only made in the case of severe abuse and neglect as opposed to family conflict, they are much more likely to give consent for the shelter stay. It will also reduce the number of first-time homeless children who end up in unsafe situations because guardian consent was not obtained in the very short allowable time frame. For these reasons, **New Beginnings is in support of extending the length of time required to obtain parental/guardian consent to stay at either type of licensed shelter for children up to 30 days.**

I thank you for your time and I urge you to vote in support of LD 1076.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Chris Bicknell". The signature is fluid and cursive, with a large initial "C" and "B".

Chris Bicknell
Executive Director
New Beginnings, Inc.

