

**April 15, 2021**

**Re:** LD 1076 An Act To Support the Operations of Youth Shelters in Maine

**Submitted by:** Chris Bicknell, Executive Director of New Beginnings on behalf of Preble Street, Shaw House and New Beginnings shelter programs.

**Why 30-60 consecutive days isn't enough for some of these kids.**

Most youth homelessness cannot be addressed in 30 days. While there are some youth who are able to exit the shelter to an appropriate placement in a short amount of time, almost all of the youth who find themselves homeless have experienced significant trauma and family conflict. It takes 30 days just to get documentation (photo ID, birth certificate, etc) and build the trust necessary to even begin any other supportive services.

Those youth needing additional time are *the most vulnerable of the vulnerable* – they are the youth with the most significant trauma and abuse to work through, with the fewest outside supports to tap into, the most serious mental health and substance use issues to identify and link to services, and the most likely to end up back in dangerous situations (including sex trafficking and selling drugs) if forced to leave shelter prematurely<sup>1</sup>.

If there is sufficient time to develop relationships and rapport, these youth are able to access both the safety of our shelters *and* the connection to programs and services provided that could actually change the trajectory of their situations – but again, only if they have the time.

**The 30-day limit puts shelter providers and youth in a catch 22.**

Under the 30-day limit, shelter providers are forced to have the youth leave for at least one night, seek daily extensions, or risk violating our licenses. Some of us get creative – giving youth coffee cards so they can sit inside a fast-food restaurant in relative safety for the night. Sometimes we just take the risk that we will get dinged on our licensing review – willing to take the hit rather than kick a youth back out onto the street who may be just starting to stabilize. Sometimes youth have no other option but to wander the streets all night and fend for themselves until they can return to the shelter.

Governor Mills recognized the reality of this situation in her April 2020 Executive Order that **eliminates length of stay limits at youth shelters altogether**, saying “those youth who reach the thirty-day homeless shelter placement limit often leave for one night and return, risking exposure to COVID-19”. During this one night, they are also exposed to many other potentially harmful circumstances – including being used as a drug mule, being sex trafficked, or sleeping outside or under a bridge.<sup>2</sup> LD 1076 would at least expand this artificial deadline – and provide a more realistic timeline for transitioning youth.

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<sup>1</sup> A combination of factors makes homeless youth vulnerable to both sex and labor traffickers. Studies have shown 19% of youth have been trafficked in some way in an attempt to meet their basic needs. <https://www.acf.hhs.gov/fysb>.

<sup>2</sup> **AN ORDER INCREASING ELIGIBILITY FOR CHILDREN'S HOMELESS SHELTERS DURING THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC**; April 27, 2020. [https://www.maine.gov/governor/mills/sites/maine.gov/governor.mills/files/inline-files/EO47\\_Childrens%20Homeless%20Shelters.pdf](https://www.maine.gov/governor/mills/sites/maine.gov/governor.mills/files/inline-files/EO47_Childrens%20Homeless%20Shelters.pdf)

### **Is 90 days the right number?**

In some ways, 90 days is just as arbitrary as 30 days. As mentioned during the hearing, the adult shelter system has no time limit. So, while LD 1076 proposes to extend the 30 day limit to 90 days, if there is interest in statutorily enshrining the current [Executive Order](#) **which suspended the night limit altogether**, mirroring the adult system, we would also support that idea.<sup>3</sup>

The Executive Order has given us almost a year of experience operating without the 30 day consecutive day limit (since April 27, 2020). And we have heard of no serious problems stemming from that change in policy. In fact, the change in practice has only reinforced the value and importance of letting the youth experiences and opportunities guide the timeline. This is especially true for our older teenagers, who are facing long waits for placement in foster care – and for those older youth transitioning into independent living situations. We know the length of waitlist times for PNMI and other subsidized housing can take months allowing 60 more days in the shelter is 60 days those youth have a safe supportive place to live while awaiting a placement with an appropriate level of care for their needs.

### **Will this disincentivize shelter providers or youth to work towards transition?**

We heard concerns that having a 90 day limit disincentivizes either us, as providers, or youth, as clients, to work towards safe, longer term placement. We urge you all to imagine what it's like to be a homeless young person, and what it is like to be in one of our shelters. As welcoming as we can make them – we know the experience itself is traumatic. No youth wants to be there, and **none of us want to have these youth in shelter any longer than is absolutely necessary**, but it's significantly better than them being used as a drug mule, being sex trafficked, or sleeping under a bridge. We are a refuge – we provide stability until the youth are ready to move on to safer more permanent settings, so at least we know where they are and that they have a safe place to stay.

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<sup>3</sup> [AN ORDER INCREASING ELIGIBILITY FOR CHILDREN'S HOMELESS SHELTERS DURING THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC](#); April 27, 2020. “WHEREAS, those youth who reach the thirty-day homeless shelter placement limit often leave for one night and return, risking exposure to COVID-19 and increasing the exposure risk of shelter staff and other clients...” [I. ORDER A](#) Those parts of 22 M.R.S. § 8101(2) and § 8101(4-A) that limit placement of children in an emergency children's shelter and a shelter for homeless children to thirty consecutive days or less are suspended...”

## Preble Street Joe Kreisler Teen Shelter

### Number of 30-day Waiver Requests Submitted between 3/1/2019-3/1/2020:

- 6 adult waivers
- **10 minor waivers**

Total Youth Served : 96

**Youth staying longer than 50 nights: 30 or 32.25% of all youth**

Total Bednights and Occupancy Rate: 3917 (45% occupancy rate) – for period between 3/31/20-3/31/21

The max capacity of 24 beds filled per night would be 8760 bednights for 365 days.  
Historical occupancy rate from past several years:

- 2018: 5243 bednights (60% occupancy rate)
- 2019: 6554 bednights (75% occupancy rate)
- 2020: 4656 bednights (53% occupancy rate)

### Length of Stay:

- 17 Clients (18% of total) stayed 5 nights or less
- 17 Clients (18% of total) stayed 6-15 nights
- 16 Clients (17% of total) stayed 16-30 nights
- 16 Clients (17% of total) stayed 31-50 nights--- 66 clients (69%) stayed 50 nights or less
- 22 Clients (23% of total) **stayed 51-100 nights**
- 8 Clients (8% of total) **stayed 101 or more nights.**
  - Max # of nights in shelter for a single client was 336. Next highest was 177.
- 15 clients (16% of total) had stays of 30 or more consecutive nights. **Of these, one had two instances of 30+ nights, and one had 3 instances.**
  - Of these 15, 5 clients stayed 100 or more nights overall
  - These 15 clients accounted for 34% of total bednights
- **Of 44 clients housed since June 2020, only 4 have returned.**