

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

My name is Cassandra McDermott, and I am writing in support of LD 1076: An Act to Support the Operations of Youth Shelters in Maine. I spend 40 hours a week supporting homeless youth, and I truly believe that this bill would have a huge impact on their ability to feel safe and supported, thus empowering them to fully engage in housing efforts and opportunities.

On a day-to-day basis, homeless youth are experiencing a profound amount of stress from the moment they wake up in the morning to the moment that they fall asleep, though this amount of stress often impairs sleep. Providing safe, consistent shelter services is critical so that our youth can feel supported. Additionally, it is important that our youth are able to have enough energy to not only get through the day but to succeed in their goals, such as employment and housing.

When youth are made aware of the 30-day rule at the shelter, they are overcome with a sense of panic; they become pale and begin asking frantic questions, like “why?” and “where am I supposed to go?,” and “what if I get killed?”. Though some of these questions appear to be extreme, this is the stress of being a homeless youth and having to ask themselves, “what if something happens to me?”. Our job, as a community, is to make it so that youth never even have to think about this question, let alone ask it to the individuals providing their shelter every night. When youth are reminded about their 30 days being up, they often spend the next few days leading up to it in preparation. This can entail gathering camping supplies to sleep outside which, for an inexperienced camper in Maine in the winter, is potentially deadly due to the harsh temperatures and lack of preparation and supplies. This also means scrambling to couch surf with anyone who will allow them to stay the night which can create unsafe, and potentially dangerous, situations. There is a high risk of sex trafficking among this vulnerable population and having nowhere else to go creates a desperation that sometimes results in this unfortunate situation. Another example is that they opt for staying one night at an alternative shelter that is not meant for youth, meaning that clients are often exposed to dangerous and uncomfortable situations.

I once had a client who was 19 years old say to me that he would rather “attempt to end his own life and possibly end up at the hospital” than have to find somewhere else to sleep for the night. Often, our homeless youth are experiencing struggles with their mental health, many of whom have experienced a lifetime of PTSD. Having to scramble to find a place to sleep for the night feels like an impossibly scary task. Unfortunately, there are just not enough resources for housing youth that do not require this amount of time, and it is extremely rare that we will see a youth become successfully housed within a month.

Increased funding for homeless youth is urgent! Every single day, shelters house, clean, feed, clothe, and physically, mentally, and financially support youth without missing a beat. Shelters do not get “breaks” where we can shut down and revamp in order to re-allocate funds so that we can cover all of the needs. That being said, increasing funding is essential for shelters to be able to run and do so intentionally and effectively. By meeting these needs, youth can feel empowered and supported so that they can focus on their goals. In my experience, youth are successful at becoming housed when all of their needs are met—social, spiritual, physical, and emotional. The more funding that is available to sheltering homeless youth, the more that staff and case workers can focus on supporting youth with case work needs, such as education, employment, and housing. Youth are incredibly resilient, and they have the potential to

succeed with the right amount of support. We can provide that support by increasing our shelter funding. Thank you for your time.