

In Support of LD 1076
An Act to Support the Operation of Youth Shelters in Maine

Testimony by Leah McDonald, Preble Street Teen Services

Good morning Senator Claxton, Representative Meyer, and members of the Joint Standing Committee on Health and Human Services. My name is Leah McDonald, and I am the Director of Teen Services at Preble Street. I am here today to testify on behalf of Preble Street **in support of LD 1076, A Bill to Support the Operation of Youth Shelters in Maine.**

Preble Street provides low-barrier services throughout the state of Maine that empower people experiencing problems with homelessness, housing, hunger, and poverty and we advocate for solutions to these problems. Preble Street's Teen Services programs offer a full spectrum of care for homeless and runaway youth between the ages of 12-21. Our program offerings include a 24-bed licensed youth shelter, called Joe Kreisler Teen Shelter, a drop-in Teen Center, a street outreach program, and a transitional living housing program. At Teen Services, we provide safety and support 24 hours a day, 7 days a week, 365 days a year to over 200 youth and young adults each year. We have worked with youth experiencing homelessness in the state of Maine for over 25 years and we know first-hand the realities of what it looks like to support youth experiencing homelessness in what is often their darkest moments.

LD 1076 is a strong bill that addresses and removes two critical barriers currently required by statute within Maine's licensed youth shelters, and also provides a critically needed increase in funding allocation for these shelters.

The first barrier addressed by this bill is the **length of maximum stay** currently permissible within our youth shelters. **Currently, licensed youth shelters are only permitted to house youth for up to 30 days at a time.** There may have been a time in the distant past when 30 days was a reasonable amount of time for providers to support youth in resolving their homelessness, but that is simply no longer the case. Within their first 30 days in our shelter, youth find stability, trusted adults, a trauma-informed environment, and the opportunity to begin goal-setting for their future. For most, those first weeks in the safety of our emergency shelter are a desperately needed respite from whatever traumatizing events led to their homelessness. It is only after they have achieved some stabilization that they can begin to work toward safe and stable housing goals, all of which take time – be it reunification with family, transitional living, or independent housing. It is simply unrealistic to think that all of this can be achieved within 30 days. And, so, what this rule looks like in reality is that our clients must “reset the clock” every 30th night by staying elsewhere for one night. This can be extremely anxiety-provoking, scary, and even retraumatizing for youth because they are now being asked to leave the stability and safety of our shelter. Our staff begin working with clients to prepare for the dreaded “30th night” days in advance to ensure they have a safe place to stay, but many choose to camp (regardless of the season), stay with acquaintances (who may or may not be safe), or (quite literally) walk through

the city all night. **LD 1076 will extend the length of stay permissible in Maine's youth shelters for up to 90 days, which is a far more realistic time frame for most youth experiencing homelessness to find safe and stable housing without subjecting them to the additional trauma of kicking them out as soon as they are ready to begin working in earnest toward their goals.**

The second barrier addressed and removed by LD 1076 is the **72-hour time limit currently in place for shelters to receive parental/guardian consent to shelter a youth under the age of 18**. Let me be clear that we are in strong favor of requiring parental/guardian consent to shelter a minor, but the existing 72-hour time limit in order to do so is often not realistic and often leads to further trauma and harm to the child. Most youth under 18 who are experiencing homelessness have also experienced extreme family trauma and conflict, and their parent/guardian are often unwilling to provide consent for their stay within the required 72-hour window. This places shelters in the impossible situation of denying services to youth in need, who often don't return home and instead enter unsafe and risky situations. It often requires time, trust-building, and family mediation in order to gain the necessary consent, at which time we are often also able to start working with the family units toward reunification. **An extension of the required time limit to obtain parental/guardian consent to up to 30 days, as proposed by LD 1076, is a more realistic and trauma-informed approach to working with children experiencing homelessness.**

Finally, **LD 1076 will provide critical funding support to help Maine's youth shelters** keep the doors open, lights on, and remain fully staffed. Maine's youth shelters and the staff that operate them serve as first responders for some of our most vulnerable youth and young adults in the state. The work done by these shelters is life-saving and transformative, but it is getting harder and harder for youth shelters to raise the funds needed to keep the doors open and hire the skilled workers needed to care for youth and young adults. While the operating costs of running a shelter have risen exponentially, the funding sources most shelters rely on have not. LD 1076 will provide a critically needed increase in funding allocation for these services.

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

Sincerely,

Leah McDonald

Teen Services Director, Preble Street