



# HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

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*Testimony of Rep. Victoria Morales co-sponsoring*

## **LD 1076, An Act To Support the Operations of Youth Shelters in Maine**

*Before the Joint Standing Committee on Health and Human Services*

Senator Claxton, Representative Meyer, and esteemed members of the Joint Standing Committee on Health and Human Services, my name is Victoria Morales, and I represent House District 33 in South Portland. I am proud to co-sponsor **LD 1076, An Act To Support the Operations of Youth Shelters in Maine**, which will provide needed flexibility and address two serious barriers to success for youth facing homelessness in Maine.

Under LD 1076, length of shelter stay would be extended to 90 days for all youth, and youth shelter clients under age 18 could be admitted for up to 30 days without first notifying or obtaining permission from the youth's parent or guardian.

These changes are needed because the current statutory limits do not accurately reflect the drivers or the real-life situations of Maine youth experiencing homelessness. And, because youth can be forced to leave shelters (after 72 hours unless consent is given, or on the 31<sup>st</sup> night) regardless of whether they are ready and regardless of whether they have any safe place to go next, these rules have the potential to, and do, lead to dangerous situations and actual harm.

First, related to the 72-hour extension - I appreciate and respect the role of parental consent in decisions related to youth under the age of 18. But, by extending the 72-hour requirement for acquiring parental consent, we can both support family engagement, trust-building, mediation and positive familial outcomes, while also better protecting the ability to provide a safe, stable respite for youth who may be in the midst of acute conflict with those being asked to give permission. In those first couple of days, it is not uncommon for the same family conflict that led to the shelter placement to cloud or negatively impact a parent or guardian's willingness to provide initial consent. We hear clearly from providers that this narrow, 72-hour time limit actually creates significant barriers to successful resolution - both for the youth and their parents. Within that short window, there is not enough time for tempers to settle and for all involved to

get the information they need to make clear-headed decisions about the options and services available.

Second, extending the length of stay at licensed youth shelters to up to 90 days would solve a second, equally huge barrier to serving these youth. Simply put, 30 days is sometimes not enough time for these youth to stabilize from traumatic events that led to homelessness, or to develop the skills and access the resources to be successful on their own. An extension to 90 days would allow youth seeking to return home time to engage in family mediation, conflict resolution and access other relevant services – giving them a real chance at success. And, for younger youth not able to return home or older youth seeking independent living, it would provide a reasonable window to stabilize, and to seek and secure appropriate alternative care or independent housing.

The alternative is grim. When parents won't consent in that 72-hours, or the 30-day clock is up, the reality is that kids don't miraculously get to go home to a safe, stable place – they couch surf, sleep outside, become a victim of sex trafficking, or end up in some other potentially unsafe or difficult situation. Or they choose to return home to a dangerous environment or before they and their families are ready.

In this way, the requirements *themselves* end up creating risk and exposing youth to harm; the requirements *themselves* compound and add to the trauma so typically connected to youth homelessness and the requirements *themselves* interfere with youths' ability to access an education and benefit from counseling, job, housing, and other supportive services.

With passage of LD 1076, we can fix this.

The critical changes in LD 1076 will better reflect the needs and circumstances of youth experiencing homelessness, provide flexibility, and allow these most vulnerable Mainers the best chance at safety, stability, and success. I urge you to vote ought to pass. Thank you.