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April 8, 2021

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

Senator Claxton, Representative Meyer, and members of the Health and Human Services Committee, my name is Cullen Ryan, and I am the Executive Director of Community Housing of Maine or CHOM, the largest supportive housing provider for homeless populations in Maine. Our staff of 11 works collaboratively with more than 50 different service provider organizations to effectively and efficiently house some 1100 of Maine's most vulnerable people. I am also a member of the Statewide Homeless Council and serve as President of the Maine Continuum of Care Board of Directors.

I am testifying today on behalf of CHOM and the Maine Homeless Policy Committee in support of LD 1076, which would importantly extend the length of stay in both categories of youth shelters (those defined as "emergency children's shelters" and "shelters for homeless children" per Maine statute) from 30 consecutive days or overnights to 90 consecutive days or overnights.

Extending the allowable length of stay in youth shelters is wise, as it can better allow engagement with youth experiencing homelessness to attain a feeling of safety and security, as well as access to important supportive services. This directly aligns with Maine's Plan to End and Prevent Homelessness as it allows for better engagement from crisis to stability, and a better continuity of key service components to attaining housing and long-term stability, including the important process of trust and rapport building. This provides youth experiencing homelessness in Maine the opportunity to build the skills and resources necessary for a life of physical and mental well-being, and ultimately success in housing.

As such, we heartily support any legislation, including LD 1076, which would extend the continuous length of time allowed in shelters.

Additionally, this bill would also extend the parental consent component of current Department of Health and Human Services licensure rules, increasing the length of time a child may be admitted into a shelter for youth experiencing homelessness prior to notification of their parent or guardian. Family reunification is very important, but in some instances, increasing this length of time could ultimately allow shelter staff to better engage with youth and their families, foster a safe, secure, and supportive environment, and uncover and address factors underlying their homelessness. We certainly want to lower barriers for youth in accessing shelter, and we know some youth will avoid shelters altogether (placing themselves at tremendous risk) for fear of the required contact with parents/guardians. Eliminating this barrier is important. For youth experiencing homelessness, family conflict, domestic violence, abuse, human trafficking, and being kicked out of a parental/familial home due to LGBTQ+ identity, all have been identified as major contributing factors for youth homelessness and are outlined in Maine's Plan to End and Prevent Homelessness. Extending the length of time prior to requiring parental notification can sometimes work better to keep youth safe; the added flexibility will help. Emergency shelters for youth in Maine are extremely skilled at engaging and working with youth and their families, and working to resolve homelessness, whether through family reunification, or in rarer cases, through other interventions such as transitional housing and permanent supportive housing. This is important, delicate work that requires building trust and establishing relationships, all of which could be jeopardized if care is not taken to protect the safety, security, and wellbeing of youth experiencing homelessness. We can eliminate the barrier of *required* notification while encouraging the norm to be as soon as logical.

Youth shelters in Maine have been underfunded for more than a decade. Importantly, this bill includes some additional funding for emergency shelters serving youth, restoring funding to 2006 levels, after



which funding was cut substantially. Costs of providing shelter and services have continued to rise. The funding included in LD 1076 doesn't fully restore funding to levels commensurate with cost of living and increases for staff salaries in the subsequent years, let alone the other costs of providing services. But this funding will help avert catastrophe. I would ask the Committee to support LD 1076's fiscal note so that at the very least, youth shelters can maintain current capacity and not risk closure.

Homelessness is a major public health crisis, and affordable housing is healthcare. Investing in housing stability for Maine people creates a foundation to help Mainers rebuild better from the pandemic. We lacked resources before the pandemic and now we are seeing increased demand. This bill is part of a continuum of legislation that addresses housing needs in Maine, from access to safe emergency housing and supportive services, to rental assistance and housing production. These bills work in synch with each other to end and prevent homelessness.

Please support LD 1076 so that we can ensure emergency shelters for youth across Maine can continue to provide critical services to youth experiencing homelessness.

Thank you for the opportunity to comment.