

Testimony of Vera Institute of Justice Submitted in Support of HB 1422

April 14th, 2023

My name is Lindsay Rosenthal, and I am the director of the Vera Institute of Justice's initiative to End Girls Incarceration (EGI). I thank the legislature for the opportunity to submit testimony in support of this bill, which is a positive step towards solving the crisis of youth and young adult homelessness in Maine.

Vera works to end mass incarceration, protect immigrants' rights, ensure dignity for people behind bars, and build safe, thriving communities. EGI works to zero out the country's confinement of girls and gender expansive youth. Through partnerships in jurisdictions in several states, including Maine, EGI aims to support the well-being of young people in their communities, address the root causes of their incarceration, and permanently close the doors to girls' juvenile detention and placement facilities.

From 2018 to 2020, Vera worked with the Maine Department of Corrections (DOC) towards ending girls' incarceration statewide by working to keep girls and other young people in the community and provide appropriate services. Our work in Maine has given us a view into the problems facing many young people in the state, including homelessness and housing instability, as well as issues like mental health needs and commercial sex trafficking that might drive young people into homelessness.

Far too many young people in Maine do not have safe and stable housing.¹ To address the crisis, youth homelessness stakeholders in Maine—including youth with lived expertise, service providers, representatives from intersecting systems, and many others—engaged in a year-long collaborative planning process that produced a strong statewide vision and plan for addressing youth homelessness. The result is captured in “Maine’s Coordinated Community Plan to Prevent and End Youth and Young Adult Homelessness,” which was published in the 2021 report, *Hope and Opportunity for ME (H.O.ME)*. The report lays out a plan to ensure that youth and young adult homelessness in Maine is rare, and brief when it occurs, by meeting young people with both housing resources and an array of wraparound services to promote well-being during a pivotal developmental stage in their lives.²

However, even with recent increased state and federal support to address Maine's housing crisis, not enough resources are available to realize the H.O.ME plan. The youth homelessness crisis continues, and the lack of safe and stable housing is both a cause and a consequence of youth incarceration for Maine's most vulnerable young people.³ *Place Matters* recently issued a report summarizing findings from the first year of implementation of DOC's Regional Care Teams (RCT), which were set up to help support diversion and release from Long Creek Youth Development Center.⁴ They found that housing was a need for **50 percent** of youth referred to RCT, making it the most commonly identified need.

Vera also completed a landscape analysis of available housing resources for minors, including interviewing providers about capacity and priorities for service expansion.⁵ The landscape analysis concluded that Maine has many dedicated providers serving youth experiencing homelessness, as well as strong leadership from young people with lived expertise, but there

simply aren't enough housing units/beds and other services available to meet current needs. Vera's analysis also reinforced that the lack of housing capacity contributes to the problem of youth incarceration in Maine.

Housing vouchers are a viable solution to this problem. By allowing recipients to seek housing in the private housing market, vouchers allow people to circumvent public/affordable housing shortages, making this an immediately effective strategy. Further, by virtue of enabling recipients to find and select their own housing, vouchers will also offer youth and young adults experiencing homelessness much-needed flexibility to seek housing that either allows them to stay near schools and support systems, or to look further afield from any danger they might be currently experiencing.

Decades of extensive research have demonstrated the effectiveness of housing vouchers in reducing homelessness and housing instability, among other benefits.⁶ One review calls voucher expansion "the single most important step policymakers can take to help families afford housing."⁷ The U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) Family Options study looked at 2,000 families experiencing homelessness over 18 months, and it found housing vouchers to be more effective in stabilizing families than other forms of assistance, including temporary rental assistance, temporary housing, and shelter.⁸

While there is limited research on the effects of housing programs on minors experiencing homelessness separate from their families, the existing research on families shows that vouchers are especially beneficial to children.⁹ Studies show that children whose families receive housing vouchers have improved educational outcomes, health outcomes (and costs), social behavior, and future employment and income.¹⁰

HB 1422 has many merits as written. We applaud the choice to use the educational definition of "homeless student," per section 13-A of the Maine educational code.¹¹ This broad definition will allow the bill to do the most possible good for Maine's youth. Further, research demonstrates that vouchers are especially effective when paired with supportive services, so we are pleased that this bill provides funding for such services.¹²

Finally, we recommend that the state plan to educate landlords on the voucher program in anticipation of possible discrimination in the rental market against youth attempting to secure housing with these vouchers.¹³

There are few housing options available to minors in need. Providing vouchers, as well as more supportive services, would be an excellent step in solving Maine's crisis of youth and young adult homelessness. I urge you to support HB 1422 and would welcome the opportunity to discuss the matter further.

Thank you,
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¹ Chloe Teboe, “Maine Youth Experience Homelessness Amidst Affordable Housing Shortage,” News Center Maine (WCSH), June 8, 2022, perma.cc/3XBD-9457; “Midcoast Maine Sees Rise in Youth Homelessness,” WGME, March 22, 2022, perma.cc/X48Q-BL3X; and Vanessa Paoletta, “Homeless in Maine: Rising Number of Homeless Teens Face Grim Future,” *Sun Journal*, March 5, 2023, perma.cc/BUC8-E8JH.

² Maine State Housing Authority, New Beginnings, Maine Continuum of Care, Main Statewide Youth Action Board, and Maine Department of Health and Human Services, *H.O.M.E.: Maine’s Coordinated Community Plan to Prevent and End Youth and Young Adult Homelessness* (Augusta, ME: MaineHousing, 2021), perma.cc/F667-D3JU.

³ “The Undeniable Link Between Incarceration and Homelessness,” Housing Up, August 23, 2022, perma.cc/K7R3-LFHZ.

⁴ Mara Sanchez, Erica King, Jill Ward, et al., *Regional Care Teams First Year Review: Cross Systems Collaboration to Improve Positive Youth Outcomes* (Portland, ME: Place Matters, 202), perma.cc/K8UZ-STT9.

⁵ Vera Institute of Justice, “Addressing Housing Instability as a Pathway to Incarceration for Minor Girls and Gender Expansive Youth in Maine,” Memo to Juvenile Justice Advisory Group, January 2022. See also Maine Housing, et al, *H.O.M.E.*, 2021.

⁶ Fischer, “Research Shows Housing Vouchers Reduce Hardship,” 2015. See also Ingrid Ellen Gould, “What Do We Know About Housing Choice Vouchers?,” *Regional Science and Urban Economics* 80 (2020), doi.org/10.1016/j.regsciurbeco.2018.07.003.

⁷ Will Fischer, Sonya Acosta, and Erik Gartland, “More Housing Vouchers: Most Important Step to Help More People Afford Stable Homes,” CBPP, May 13, 2021, perma.cc/9PJH-4TQR.

⁸ Daniel Gubits, Marybeth Shinn, Stephen Bell, et al., *Family Options Study: Short-Term Impacts of Housing and Services Interventions for Homeless Families* (Washington, DC: HUD, 2015), perma.cc/556E-YHH2.

⁹ Some early studies include Jean Zhuo Wang, Sebastian Mott, Olivia Magwood, et al., “The Impact of Interventions for Youth Experiencing Homelessness on Housing, Mental Health, Substance Use, and Family Cohesion: A Systematic Review,” *BMC Public Health* 19 (2019), perma.cc/N752-2ZTR; and Justina Zhane Bethune, “Combating Youth Homelessness: A Comparative Case Study of NYS Housing Vouchers and Supporting Housing Models for Homeless Youth,” Master’s thesis, Cornell University, 2022, perma.cc/X8KC-84Z7. Importantly, the latter concludes that longevity is the most important component to successful voucher programs, highlighting the need for guaranteed long-term funding.

¹⁰ For an overview of these benefits, see Fischer, “Research Shows Housing Vouchers Reduce Hardship,” 2015; and Community Preventative Service Task Force, *Social Determinants of Health: Tenant-Based Housing Voucher Programs* (Washington, DC: CDC, 2020), perma.cc/TS4V-LBGR. For health benefits, see Ramona K. C. Finnie, Yinan Peng, and Robert A. Hahn, et al., “Tenant-Based Housing Voucher Programs: A Community Guide Systematic Review,” *Journal of Public Health Management and Practice* 28, no. 6 (2022), perma.cc/YQ77-STDT. For lower healthcare costs, see Craig Evan Pollack, Amanda L. Blackford, and Shawn Du, et al., “Association of Receipt of a Housing Voucher With Subsequent Hospital Utilization and Spending,” *JAMA* 322, no. 21 (2019), perma.cc/K7YK-C2DY. For improved school performance, see

Amy Ellen Schwartz, Keren Mertens Horn, and Ingrid Gould Ellen, et al., “Do Housing Vouchers Improve Academic Performance? Evidence from New York City,” *Journal of Policy Analysis and Management* 20, no. 1 (2020), onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/abs/10.1002/pam.22183; and Sarah Gold, “Housing Assistance and Children’s Educational Attainment: A Longitudinal Study,” Doctoral thesis, Rutgers, 2018, perma.cc/Y63K-BS33.

¹¹ Maine Legislature, Maine Revised Statutes, “Title 20-A, Chapter 13: The Student Information Privacy Act,” perma.cc/A5J6-LD9U.

¹² Fischer, et al., “More Housing Vouchers,” 2021; and Bethune, “Combating Youth Homelessness,” 2022.

¹³ For rental discrimination in Maine, see Dan Neumann, “‘People Feel Unheard’: Lawmakers Search for More Answers to Maine’s Housing Crisis,” *Maine Beacon*, January 28, 2022, perma.cc/C5KU-8EN3. For rental discrimination nationally, see Kristian Hernández, “Biden Wants to Offer More Housing Vouchers. Many Landlords Won’t Accept Them.” *Pew Trusts*, May 12, 2021, perma.cc/77K7-898H.