



SchoolHouse Connection Support for LD 1609

TO: The Honorable Chairs Sen. Teresa Pierce and Rep. Traci Gere, and the distinguished members of the Maine Committee on Housing

My name is Rodd Monts, and I am the director of state policy for SchoolHouse Connection. We are a national nonpartisan, nonprofit that works to address youth homelessness through education. Our organization has helped pass legislation in Maine and more than 20 other states aimed at improving education outcomes PreK through higher education, along with access to housing, shelter, and other supportive resources for young people experiencing homelessness.

We support the concept proposed in LD 1609 and look forward to reviewing the legislation.

The Maine Student Homelessness Prevention fund has the potential to greatly improve the ability of the professionals closest to the issue of youth homelessness to help get more students the housing and support they need. Schools are a natural entry point for both the early intervention and prevention of homelessness.

For the past three decades, public school systems have been uniquely equipped to identify and assist families at risk of becoming unhoused or experiencing homelessness. Under the federal [McKinney-Vento Act Homeless Assistance Act](#), every U.S. school district has a designated homeless liaison who identifies and supports families experiencing homelessness in their area.

The work that they do with the homeless children and families they serve put school district homeless liaisons on the front lines of the housing crisis. But they can face multiple barriers when attempting to help families access emergency rental assistance, or to meet emergency needs so they can end their homelessness sustainably. In some cases, families may not meet stringent eligibility criteria for emergency help. In other cases, applying for assistance or navigating supportive systems can be too difficult for them to manage.

LD 1609 would remove these barriers by making emergency funds available directly to homeless liaisons to meet critical needs. Liaisons could quickly help stabilize families without them having to endure a lengthy process that can, at times, be traumatizing when they must repeatedly share the details of their homelessness with agency staff they don't know. Liaisons build relationships with the students and families they serve so schools are a more comfortable environment for them. By leveraging the existing infrastructure public schools provide we can both stabilize more vulnerable families and children and prevent further educational disruption

Other states are adopting similar approaches by equipping schools with flexible funding to address homelessness. For example, the [Homeless Student Stability Program](#) in Washington



state supplements the federal M-V Act funds to provide rental assistance, help with housing searches and related supports with the liaison network distributing aid. The [Homework Starts with Home program](#) in Minnesota also pairs housing and social services to families experiencing homelessness identified through public schools. Both efforts have reported positive outcomes and continue to grow.

Finally, we want to point out that school districts have been successful in using the flexibility of the [American Rescue Plan Homeless Children and Youth](#) (ARP-HCY) funds, which can be spent on a broader range of activities than the typical M-V [Education for Homeless Children and Youth](#) (EHCY) grants.

EHCY monies are limited to activities related to the identification, enrollment, attendance, and success of children and youth experiencing homelessness. These funds cannot be used for utilities, or other kinds of emergency assistance such as rent. The ARP-HCY funds, on the other hand, are broader, and can be used for a few nights in a hotel, car repairs, and other emergency needs. This flexibility has allowed schools to do more to stabilize the entire family, and therefore has greater impact on school attendance and success. However, ARP-HCY funding will run out in September 2024. Moreover, both EHCY and ARP-HCY must be used for children and youth who are unhoused and experiencing homelessness.

LD 1609 could help more families avoid homelessness in the first place by allowing schools to meet immediate need and improve prevention. It also could continue the flexibility of ARP-HCY, which has reached significantly more school districts in Maine than annual EHCY funds. This legislation should improve academic outcomes in the near term and reduce adult homelessness, longer term. Because the single greatest risk factor for young adult homelessness is lack of a high school degree or GED.

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