



Date May 11<sup>th</sup>, 2023

Good Shepherd Food Bank of Maine testimony to the Committee on Housing in support of LD 1710 – An Act to Establish the Maine Rental Assistance and Guarantee Program and Amend the Laws Regarding Tenants and the Municipal General Assistance Program.

To Chairperson Pierce, Chairperson Gere, and members of the Joint Standing Committee on Housing.

My name is Tristan Coffin and I am the Director of IT for Good Shepherd Food Bank of Maine. I am here today to express our support, and ask for your support, of LD 1710 An Act to Establish the Maine Rental Assistance and Guarantee Program and Amend the Laws Regarding Tenants and the Municipal General Assistance Program.

The mission of Good Shepherd Food Bank is to eliminate hunger in Maine by improving access to nutritious food for people in need, building strong community partnerships, and mobilizing the public in the fight to end hunger. Good Shepherd Food Bank works in partnership with nearly 600 organizations to help distribute food to community members in need. Our network of partner agencies includes food pantries, meal sites, senior centers, school programs, and healthcare facilities. In our work centering equity, we are increasingly working with communities of color to address food security in a culturally responsive way.

We believe there is a solution to the problem of hunger in Maine. Working in partnership with the state legislature we can and will help reduce the impact of hunger in our state and make Maine a stronger, better place to work and live.

Access to safe and affordable housing is a key component to a person's general well-being, their overall health both physically and mentally, and is required for organizations like Good Shepherd Food Bank of Maine to succeed in our own mission of eliminating hunger. I would like to write about a few facets of experiencing homelessness here to provide some insight into the longstanding impacts of living in poverty can have, even years after coming out of poverty.

1. The world becomes incredibly small when you find yourself without a home, reliable transportation, or the ability to access services to assist when finding yourself in need. I experienced these issues in the town of Rumford in my late teens and early twenties. Rumford had no shelters at the time that would provide a bed to a male in their late teens/early twenties, few GA programs, and what services were available were in high demand. I was constantly told I would need to go to the Lewiston or Portland areas to have any success in finding a bed or other assistance. The prospect of having to move to a city for the first time, alone, without a support system or place to go, was daunting. Were it not for extended family willing to help in light of these events, I don't know what I would have done. I was lucky and so many others are not as lucky in similar situations. I believe it is the role of government to eliminate the need of luck in order to simply survive in America.

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2. Being a minor in a position of homelessness was incredibly hard. I was constantly told I needed a legal guardian when applying for services, regardless of the fact that my legal guardians were the reason I was homeless in the first place. I went without for my first year simply because I wasn't old enough to gain access to certain services as a minor who wasn't able to be legally emancipated in time for it to matter. The entire process, even when I was old enough to benefit from these services, felt needlessly complicated, had a multitude of barriers preventing folks from participating, and tended towards a feeling of being provided charity that further promotes the idea that being in poverty is the byproduct of some moral failing.
3. Experiencing hunger and homelessness has lifelong impacts that stretch well beyond the years you experience them directly. I have been fortunate that I've had relatively stable housing since this time in my life, however nearly 20 years removed from that level of instability has ingrained in me a constant fear of things like: Not having enough food in our home though we have never since been in a place of need. I find myself constantly making sure our fridge and freezer has enough food in it, and panic when I convince myself we don't. These feelings have been exacerbated since the birth of my daughters, though we've never struggled to provide for them. I live in a state of persistent fear that my housing situation will become unstable as a byproduct of years dealing with first homelessness and then dishonest private landlords and the shenanigans they create that put your stability at risk. I've never once got back a deposit regardless of the level of cleaning, amount of notice we've provided, etc. While anecdotal, I have direct experience with private landlords banking on the fact that younger tenants will not have the resources available to fight them in court when they are wronged. For the majority of my early twenties I lived in housing that was un-safe, un-sanitary, and un-worthy of the sometimes exorbitant rents we were charged. I've lost countless personal belongings through illegal eviction processes where I was threatened with legal consequences as well as outright violence through my inability to "fight back" having done nothing wrong. So often those with the least amount of means to protect themselves are treated the worst simply by virtue of knowing they will never face repercussions.
4. I experienced all of the above in a time when rents could be considered more "affordable and abundant" and yet I still struggled. I can't imagine what it would be like if I found myself in a similar situation today.... I didn't have to contend with so much of our housing market being bought up by private equity firms to either charge outrageous rents or be used for short term rentals, I never struggled to find at least SOMETHING available for rent in most towns/cities we found ourselves, and I was mostly (under)employed through those times. I can't imagine what it would have been like to have zero income through the majority of those years.

All of this to say, in summary, revolved around a LOT of luck and right place/right time events that helped lift me out of homelessness. I survived only through the grace and compassion of other private citizens.

Any programs I found myself able to receive were not enough to do more than scrape by a meager existence that leads no one to a place where they can thrive. SNAP (Food Stamps then) were never



enough to feed myself for a month, let alone the apartment full of folks in a similar situation as myself without even that small subsidy to assist us. MaineCare at the time was a morass of red-tape strewn bureaucracy that then had little in the way of mental health or addiction resources available and from what anecdotal knowledge I have of it today, isn't much better. And we were never able to even get on a waiting list for a housing voucher or General Assistance when it was needed most. We, as a nation, should find ourselves collectively ashamed that as the richest country in human history, we share spaces throughout our every day with folks that are merely surviving.

I can only imagine how much farther along in life I might be, in my 40s, if I had access to resources that had helped elevate me out of a bad situation that I had no agency placing myself in. If I had lived in an environment where the stigma of poverty and addiction hadn't forced me into silence for so long out of fear of losing the life I had worked so hard to obtain. If the process to receive assistance wasn't mired in redundancy and needless complexity, maybe I and many others wouldn't feel compelled to go without due to not being able to easily navigate these systems.

We can't find success here while still espousing the motto of "Pull yourself up by the boot straps" to people who have either had those theoretical boots stolen from them, or never had boots to begin with. We also cannot fix societal and cultural problems while allowing the stigma associated with poverty to be reflected in discriminating against our most vulnerable people. We owe every person who finds themselves in our beautiful state a life of dignity, prosperity, and the resources to pursue a life of fulfillment, regardless of what brought them to a place of need.

Thank you for your consideration of our testimony.

Sincerely,

Tristan Coffin  
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