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**Testimony of Representative Kristen Cloutier  
in support of LD 211, An Act to Support Emergency Shelter Access for Persons  
Experiencing Homelessness  
Before the Joint Standing Committee on Labor and Housing**

Senator Rafferty, Representative Sylvester and distinguished members of the Labor and Housing Committee, my name is Kristen Cloutier and I proudly represent House District 60, part of Lewiston. I am here to present testimony in support of **LD 211, An Act to Support Emergency Shelter Access for Persons Experiencing Homelessness**.

Prior to the pandemic, Maine's homeless population had already reached a crisis point. On any given night, roughly 2,500 people experience homelessness in our state. We also know that people experiencing homelessness face a far higher mortality rate than sheltered people: data suggests that 84% of unsheltered individuals report physical health conditions compared to just 19% of sheltered individuals. According to the National Alliance to End Homelessness, Maine's rate of homelessness is nearly double the rate of other Northeastern states, including New Hampshire, Rhode Island and Connecticut.

As you are all aware, COVID-19 has exacerbated many of the challenges faced by those experiencing homelessness. The virus has not only increased their vulnerability due to a greater general exposure to people, but it has also made it more difficult to acquire food and supplies, and to find places that usually provide a refuge to those looking to simply keep warm during Maine's harsh winter.

Even once the pandemic is behind us, based upon current inventory, affordable housing will continue to be increasingly difficult to access, resulting in a rising number of Mainers becoming housing insecure. Additionally, Maine's homeless population is being impacted by the substance use epidemic. Currently, we do not have systems in place to adequately care for those in need of emergency response services. Instead, we are asking shelter staff members to provide these services to clients working to manage their substance use, in addition to providing a place of safety, warmth and nourishment. In these unprecedented and dire times, we can and must do better to support one of our most vulnerable populations and to resource those caring for them.

This bill would provide ongoing funds to the Shelter Operating Subsidy Program within the Maine State Housing Authority to support operations and capacity at emergency homeless shelters across the State. This bill not only provides overdue support to shelters and our homeless

population, but it is also fiscally responsible. The substance use epidemic alone has significantly increased the cost of providing shelter, and yet budgets for Maine shelters have remained flat. Increasing access to emergency shelters is significantly cheaper than footing the bill for an emergency room visit or a response from law enforcement. This increase in funding will preserve state resources, but most importantly, it will save the lives of so many of our neighbors.

To close out my testimony, I would like to make two requests for amendments to the current language in LD 211:

First, I would like to remove the phrase "low barrier" from the bill language. My intention was to ensure that low barrier shelters were included in the legislation, not to limit it ONLY to low barrier shelters. Removing this terminology will ensure that all emergency shelters have access to the funding proposed.

Secondly, I would like to specify that the funding be delivered WITHIN the funding formula set forth in the Maine State Housing Authority's Homeless Solutions Rule, rather than OUTSIDE, as is currently in the language. Again, remaining within this funding formula will ensure that all emergency shelters, including domestic violence shelters, will have access to the funding proposed. This is the preference of the Maine State Housing Authority, who will be managing the funding, and they are available to answer any questions the committee may have related to that formula both today at the public hearing, and at the work session.

Thank you for your consideration. I am happy to answer any questions.