

H.O.M.E. Inc.

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"Serve First Those Who Suffer Most"
Proud member of Emmaus International

February 14, 2021

Dear Committee Members,

Thank you for the opportunity to testify in support of LD 211 An Act to Support Emergency Shelter Access for Persons Experiencing Homelessness. I am Tracey Hair, resident of Bucksport and Executive Director of H.O.M.E. Inc. which oversees four Homeless Shelters in Hancock County.

H.O.M.E. Inc. has been doing this work since 1970 – There was a time when families in our area took care of basic necessities and shared with one another. Transportation, food, and providing heat in the long winters are ways that mutual support and care was extended to one another. There was also a time when our shelters didn't need overnight staff and staffing patterns didn't call for intensive skill to keep our shelters safe. This is not the case today, a steady increase in the opioid crisis and trauma experienced, among people needing our services has called for us to pivot into 24-hour staffing patterns at all four of our shelters and those staff require more skills to safely help people in crisis. This is our work.

The shortage of affordable housing, lack of mental health and substance use disorder services, and the COVID-19 pandemic have created a crisis in Maine that has required shelter providers to respond in ways that stretch beyond our budgets. While some of us have seen a temporary increase in funding during COVID-19, the landscape of this work will not change once temporary funding support ends. H.O.M.E.'s increased staffing patterns are needed in perpetuity to address the crisis before us.

To exacerbate the situation, COVID-19 has dramatically and permanently changed the way homeless and housing systems are delivered in Maine. As the public health crisis forced shelters to serve smaller numbers of people in many scattered sites, our staff began spreading out shelter guests to maintain adequate social distancing while creating more space to stay open for people falling into homelessness. This effort included, acquiring a house in Ellsworth for families to quarantine and isolate if they became sick, and securing hotel rooms and an apartment in Bucksport. We temporarily converted our daycare center and craft store into quarantine spaces using donated cots, and built walls out of plastic to separate spaces. We've spent months moving furniture and, in some cases, purchased new furniture. We've installed washing machines in each shelter and plexiglass at high contact areas and provided internet access for shelter guests to make sure they have equal access to up-to-date COVID-19 information. We hired a social worker and more staff and expect the staffing needs to continue to increase.

External substance use and transportation supports paused early in the pandemic and with an already increasingly vulnerable population, our work began to mirror a hospital inpatient setting. Adding to that we saw more child removals, more substance use and more violence.

Celebrating 50 Years of Building Hope

Before the pandemic, we were already experiencing a 38% increase in people presenting with substance use challenges and more than 50% of guests presented with mental illness, the pandemic exacerbated this crisis and sadly we lost one guest to suicide.

We are doing our work differently than we ever have these past 50 years. The following example outlines best the complex needs the shelter system addresses –

In 2019, an elderly man came to our shelter. He was found at the end of his driveway close to freezing to death following a fall. After welcoming him into our shelter, we learned that he had significant health challenges which left him incontinent and at times incoherent. Our work with him soon resembled a nursing home with daily cleaning and hygiene interventions as well as wound cleaning. You might remember last year, I testified about a gentleman with severe and persistent mental illness who, while staying with us, created a small fire and two floods ultimately leading to H.O.M.E. replacing a floor. This is a common story. Many shelter guests are discharged to shelters from hospitals, unable to care for themselves, and while we do our best, we do so without increased flexible funding.

An effective shelter response system requires that shelters can offer immediate and low-barrier access to anyone facing a housing crisis. Having access to emergency overnight shelter saved the life of the elderly man I mentioned who is now permanently housed in a senior housing complex.

While we have made progress as providers in reducing shelter stays in Maine, we have at the same time saw an increase in unsheltered homelessness. In Orland it comes in the form of people sleeping in wood sheds or squatting in buildings not fit for habitation, and in Ellsworth, it's individuals and families sleeping in cars in store parking lots.

Last year more than 50% of shelter our guests left shelter for permanent housing – in a time where there is no back door out of shelter due to the lack of affordable housing. It is clear that the emergency shelter system in Maine is a crucial partner in ending homelessness.

The emergency shelter network in Maine provides the most effective and cost-efficient way to connect people experiencing homelessness to the services and supports they need to stay safe and get re-housed. H.O.M.E. Inc. typically provides emergency shelter for 225 guests annually, we're a small shelter serving small towns in Down East Maine.

As our state faces one of the most severe affordable housing crises in its history, we must equip ourselves with the resources to respond with positive and effective outcomes. As a provider of emergency shelter, I understand and appreciate how precious tax dollars are and we take our responsibility to steward funding very seriously. We are committed to working to end homelessness in Maine and to deliver the strongest network of services for people experiencing homelessness. **The front line in that network is access to emergency overnight shelter.**

Respectfully submitted,

**Tracey Hair
Executive Director
H.O.M.E. Inc.**

Celebrating 50 Years of Building Hope

Tracey Hair
Bucksport

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