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**Testimony of Rob Liscord, Maine Equal Justice
In Support of LD 211
An Act to Support Emergency Shelter Access for Persons Experiencing
Homelessness
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Good morning Senator Rafferty, Representative Sylvester and members of the Joint Standing Committee on Labor and Housing. My name is Rob Liscord and I am a policy advocate focused on housing and homelessness at Maine Equal Justice, a nonprofit legal aid organization working to increase economic security, opportunity, and equity for people in Maine. I am testifying on behalf of Maine Equal Justice in support of LD 211.

LD 211 provides crucial additional funding support for shelter operations across the state of Maine. The pandemic has highlighted the need for stable housing and strong shelters as a part of Maine's public health system. Throughout the past year, Maine's longstanding shortage of affordable housing, rental assistance, case management and legal services have combined with the Covid-19 pandemic to create a dire housing crisis in the state. Hundreds of households have fallen into homelessness and thousands of Mainers have fallen behind on rent and are at risk of homelessness. This crisis has highlighted how a strong housing system is central to a strong public health response.

When our housing stability programs don't work and Maine families become homeless, shelters are the crucial emergency resource in our housing system that assist Maine families in achieving basic safety and security and taking the first steps back to permanent, stable housing and economic security.

Maine Equal Justice supports this bill, as a crucial piece in an effort to strengthen Maine's housing system for the long economic recovery from Covid-19.

Shelters are a crucial component to our housing system that catches individuals and families who fall on hard times and cannot find or access other support.

Job loss and reduced work hours created by the pandemic have increased the risk of eviction across Maine.¹ Estimates suggest that between 20,000 and 40,000 Maine households have fallen

¹ *Out of Reach: The High Cost of Housing*, National Low Income Housing Coalition (2020 Report), https://reports.nlihc.org/sites/default/files/oor/OOR_2020.pdf

behind on their rent and now risk eviction.² For many of these households, their evictions could be alleviated with timely rental assistance – which has only been of limited availability during pandemic and was largely unavailable beforehand. For others, loss of housing could be addressed through access to case management or mental health support services. Finally, others could avoid homelessness with legal representation in eviction court. However, these resources are limited in Maine, and thousands of tenants facing instability, eviction, and homelessness will not receive these supports when they are needed most.

Given these shortcomings, for the households that fall into homelessness, Maine's shelters ensure that these individuals and families can stabilize in an emergency and try to rebuild their economic security. Together with a robust rental assistance program, case management services and legal services, the shelter funding provided by LD 211 is a critical piece in protecting Maine's most vulnerable people from the horrors of homelessness.

Strong Shelters are also Vital to Achieving Racial Equity.

On any given night, 26% of Maine's homeless population are Black or African American even though they make up only 1% of Maine's population. Adequate funding for safe, accessible shelter facilities as the first step to housing is a basic step in promoting racial equity within our entire housing system.

The Pandemic has Highlighted an Existing Need for Stable Housing which includes Emergency Housing through Emergency Shelters as a Part of Maine's Public Health System.

As the committee is aware, this bill passed out of committee with bipartisan unanimous support before the pandemic forced the legislature to close last year. Certainly, the need for expanded shelter operations funding preceded COVID-19. Yet, the pandemic highlighted how a strong group of statewide shelters is essential to Maine's public health and economic response system. Throughout 2020, public health and housing officials counted on Maine's shelters to be there and relied on them to stretch Maine's capacity to address the housing and homelessness crisis that the pandemic precipitated. The shelters were well suited to the task of responding to the public health crisis of Covid-19 because homelessness is a public health crisis in its own right.

In response to the pandemic, Maine's shelter providers stretched staffing to cover additional facilities to achieve social distancing and opened quarantine and wellness shelters around the state. They had to keep shelters staffed with trained professionals in spite of a delay in PPE and limited access to testing. Shelter directors met weekly, trading best practices and lessons learned as the pandemic progressed.

Maine's shelters are solutions-oriented providers of emergency housing and supportive services. We have depended on shelters much like hospitals throughout the course of the pandemic. A commitment to expanded ongoing state funding for shelter is crucial to ensure that Maine's

² "Analysis of Current and Expected Rent Shortfall and Potential Evictions in the U.S." Stout (Sept. 25, 2020), <https://www.ncsha.org/resource/current-and-expected-rental-shortfall-and-potential-eviction-filings/>

shelters are there for Mainers as we face the slow economic recovery from the pandemic and for the next crises that the state may face. Maine shelters are a crucial part of the state's public health infrastructure and should be treated as such.

Conclusion:

Everyone in Maine deserves a safe and affordable place to call home and the opportunities to fulfill their potential that come with it. Housing and homelessness are linked and we need solutions that address both problems. Investing in housing stability for Maine people is the foundation to help Mainers rebuild better from the COVID-19 pandemic. This housing stability must include access to emergency housing when families need it most. Maine's emergency shelters provide that emergency housing. As Maine looks to strengthen its housing system and provide the continuum of solutions needed to help all Mainers achieve housing stability, shelters are a crucial part. For these reasons and more, Maine Equal Justice supports LD 211.