

Grayson Lookner  
Portland

Senator Rafferty, Representative Sylvester, and other esteemed colleagues on the Committee on Labor and Housing. My name is Rep. Grayson Lookner and I represent District 37, which is part of Portland. I am here today to speak in favor of LD 211, “An Act To Support Emergency Shelter Access for Persons Experiencing Homelessness.”

In 2017, long before the pandemic, a staggering total of 40 of our neighbors in Portland experiencing homelessness perished. A single death for preventable causes is unacceptable in my view, and addressing the crisis of housing and homelessness has been a top priority in the City of Portland for years now. Sadly, the pandemic has proven just how horrendously inadequate our shelter system is for people who end up without stable housing for reasons often beyond their control.

In 2020, during a global health pandemic during which the primary means of staying safe from falling ill was and continues to be to “stay at home,” a total of 64 of our neighbors without housing died, an increase of 60% over the previous year, according to the Portland Press Herald. How can people without a place to stay “stay at home?” The answer is they can’t, and many end up dying because of our collective inability and unwillingness to extend the needed help.

This is a human atrocity that is unfolding right under our noses, and this body has the obligation to do something about it, immediately.

While homelessness is the end result of a myriad of policy failures at every level, and this legislature must invest extensively in affordable housing projects and enact other policies to prevent this tragedy from continuing to unfold, the matter before us now is how do we help the hundreds of Mainers out on the street in the middle of a pandemic during the coldest months of the year. Do we turn our backs on them and allow more to perish? Or do we extend aid to service providers to give them the tools they need to safely house our less fortunate neighbors?

This expenditure will provide critical resources to the frontline workers who have been putting themselves in harm’s way during these last 11 months to keep the crisis from getting even worse. I urge this committee to vote “ought to pass” on LD 211, and beyond that, to look at real solutions for Mainers in precarious housing situations to prevent more avoidable deaths in the future.

Thank you.