
**Testimony of Andrea Mancuso
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
Wednesday, February 17, 2021**

Senator Rafferty, Representative Sylvester, and members of the Joint Standing Committee on Labor and Housing, I am writing on behalf of the Maine Coalition to End Domestic Violence (MCEDV) in Support of LD 211, “An Act to Support Emergency Shelter Access for Persons Experiencing Homelessness.”

MCEDV serves a membership of the eight regional domestic violence resource centers (DVRs) across the state, as well as the Immigrant Resource Center of Maine. Our programs together operate a network of 11 emergency shelters throughout Maine. In 2020, these programs provided shelter to 612 people, including 245 children - every one of them having experienced some form of acute or chronic trauma. Though less than 5% of the more than 12,000 people served by the DVRs in Maine each year ever come into shelter, our shelters are a vital and life-saving yet resource intensive service, and one that has been particularly impacted by the opioid crisis and the universal lack of mental health crisis resources in our state.

Our shelters are to be safe places for survivors of domestic abuse and violence and their children – supportive environments that also offer comprehensive services to help survivors meet their both immediate needs for safety and stability and to also help survivors address the physical and emotional trauma they have experienced in order to achieve long term, safe and stable housing. Though services vary to some degree by shelter, across the state this includes things like financial coaching, employment assistance, assistance in navigating complicated public assistance programs (GA, SNAP, rental assistance), advocacy with local housing providers, and referrals to other community partners for a broad range of additional assistance. These are the services that survivors need in order to move forward from abuse and violence safely and with some degree of long-term stability and independence. This is what we strive for.

But the reality of sheltering in Maine today often falls short of our ideal. Every day, our shelters function somewhere between de facto emergency rooms and multi-purpose triaging centers. The picture in rural Maine is particularly bleak. The only emergency shelter in Washington County is the domestic violence shelter run by the Next Step

Domestic Violence Project. With only 12 beds, this shelter is always at capacity, which, of course, doesn't stop the emergency room from calling. In Penobscot and Piscataquis Counties, the domestic violence shelter has never had success in getting a bed for someone experiencing an acute mental health crisis – the emergency room evaluates them and sends them back to the congregate living shelter – a shelter currently without resources to be staffed 24/7. The three DV shelters of the Hope and Justice Project in Aroostook County are frequently fielding calls from the emergency room to take someone in order to free up a crisis bed, which has resulted in the DV shelter taking in survivors who are not really yet stabilized.

Recognizing that this effort in the 129th legislature made it through this committee unanimously, MCEDV and our member programs ask you to support LD 211 (with Representative Cloutier's offered amendments that direct Maine Housing to use the Shelter Operations piece of the ESHAP funding formula). Additional operational funding is critically needed for all of Maine's emergency shelter programs. Sheltering is so much more than providing a warm place to sleep. We are continuously called upon to respond to greater and more complicated needs, and the resources have not kept pace. COVID has exacerbated these challenges, but they existed before COVID and will remain when the pandemic is resolved.

While every shelter within our network has unique funding challenges, the common thread is that there just isn't currently enough to support survivors in the ways that they need. Even a small increase in operational funding makes a meaningful difference and helps fill in the gaps that current funding does not stretch far enough to address. The needs of our shelter programs include:

- Covering the increased costs of utilities as well as food and supplies (including cleaning supplies, toilet paper and paper towels);
- Bolstering staff coverage for time periods that are currently understaffed: evening, overnight, and weekends;
- General shelter upkeep and repairs, including money to replace damaged items or things that wear out over time like sheets, towels, blankets and dishes;
- Transportation support in rural counties;
- Support for new programming that speaks to the needs of survivors.

Staff coverage in particular is incredibly impactful to survivors. Feedback from survivors accessing our shelter is that the nights we are able to have staff stay at the shelter later into the evening, has a direct corollary relationship with the degree of safety perceived by survivors. At present, none of our shelters are able to achieve full on-site 24/7 coverage.

Last year, our shelter programs served 245 children with no designated funding to address the need for specialized programming or supportive services for children. These are

children who are living with trauma. More resources are necessary to appropriately attend to their unique needs.

Though the COVID-19 pandemic has brought many challenges to sheltering, it has also taught us a lot about how we might both increase capacity for sheltering and better accommodate those who need sheltering in a community where a shelter is not located. New Hope for Women, which provides services in Sagadahoc, Lincoln, Knox and Waldo counties, and Next Step Domestic Violence Project in Washington and Hancock counties provide rich experiences to draw from. In 2020, despite not having a shelter, New Hope for Women created and supported a sheltering program that successfully provided long-term shelter to 83 survivors and their children during the pandemic. For Next Step, having only one shelter to cover Washington and Hancock has traditionally meant that survivors in Hancock County who need sheltering are brought to the shelter in Washington County. In the last year, the practice of using hotels to ensure physically distanced sheltering has enabled survivors to remain in their original communities in Hancock County, staying connected to existing support systems, employment and schools. Enhancing responsiveness to needs of individual survivors through continued exploration of non-communal sheltering could only ever happen through expanded operational funding.

Not one of our programs can exist solely on the funding that currently comes in through Maine Housing's Emergency Shelter and Housing Assistance Program. It takes a patchwork of resources, which are often purpose restricted, and it is a constant struggle with overloading under-resourced staff and outdated facilities. Shelter staff are simultaneously called upon to be nurses, child-care providers, employment coaches, counselors, administrators ... the list goes on. This supplemental funding will not change that reality, but it will provide meaningful additional dollars to help us better enable survivors to move on from abuse and violence. Thank you for the opportunity to be heard on this issue. MCEDV and our member programs are happy to serve as a resource to the Committee as you continue to discuss this issue.

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