

February 17, 2021

Testimony of Alicia Rea, Lewiston City Councilor, in support of An Act to Support Emergency Shelter Access for Persons Experiencing Homelessness

Senator Rafferty, Representative Sylvester, and members of the Joint Standing Committee on Labor & Housing.

My name is Alicia Rea. I serve as a Lewiston City Councilor, representing Ward 3. This is one of the poorest census tracts in the state of Maine with many folks at risk of losing their housing, employment, or benefits leading to homelessness. Additionally, as a member of the Lewiston School Committee, I am concerned about unhoused youth, navigating our school system and the School Committee's work to help students stay on their educational path.

In 2020, the Lewiston City Council voted unanimously on our goals, including a goal to develop a plan for the homeless population and enhance shelter availability. As we look to move forward with this goal, our community would greatly benefit from the adoption and funding of LD 211, expanding funding for the operation of emergency shelters.

Since the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, the city of Lewiston has hosted two wellness shelters, as well as a COVID-19 positive shelter where individuals could quarantine. Through these experiences, the city has essentially witnessed a case study in the types of support unhoused individuals from our community need. The idea that folks utilizing the shelter would just need help with some paperwork to obtain vouchers and find housing was an incorrect assumption, dispelled by the first shelter effort and seen throughout the continuation of the current shelter experience. The guests utilizing this emergency shelter are almost entirely local to the Lewiston area, working to find the right support that will help them find and maintain housing. State government can help here by laying the groundwork for long term solutions with this bill. Through LD 211 and others in this session, the state can play a role in regional and municipal solutions that support communities in a multi-faceted manner.

In addition to the pandemic factors, we are currently experiencing that time of winter in Maine where I am somewhat glad to be working and governing from home, a privilege afforded to you all on the committee. Emergency shelters provide life saving services in one of the most predictable environments – the cold, harsh winter of Maine. Access to emergency shelters could mean the difference between life and death for our most vulnerable community members and building resources to assist these shelters is critical for future access.

Going forward from the experiences of this global pandemic, there are quite a lot of things we would like to leave behind—the isolation, physical distancing, the illness and

death of many of our fellow Mainers. I ask that you make sure unhoused individuals are not one of those things we leave behind too.

Thank you for your time and attention.