

**Testimony of Allie Smith, Member of the City of Lewiston's Housing Committee
In Support of LD 211
An Act To Support Emergency Shelter Access for Persons Experiencing Homelessness**

Representative Rafferty, Representative Sylvester, and members of the Joint Standing Committee on Labor and Housing, thank you for the opportunity to testify today in support of LD 211, An Act To Support Emergency Shelter Access for Persons Experiencing Homelessness. My name is Allie Smith and I am here today as a member of the City of Lewiston's Housing Committee. We are a municipally appointed committee of Lewiston citizens and service providers tasked with advising the City Council and the municipality on issues related to housing in Lewiston. I was appointed to the committee as a resident of Lewiston and an owner of a multi-family home in the downtown, though I also work as a service provider to homeless youth at New Beginnings, which has been serving homeless and at-risk youth in Maine since 1980.

During our inaugural meetings in 2020, Lewiston's Housing Committee identified and voted to prioritize a list of critical housing issues facing the community. We identified homelessness as not only the most pressing and time-sensitive of these issues, but also as the issue where we had the opportunity to make the most impact. This reflects the Housing Committee's belief that while homelessness is certainly a complex, extremely serious and often life-or-death issue, it is also an issue that benefits enormously from interventions of funding, strategy, and service delivery, meaning that it is not only a vital place to allocate resources, it is also a space in which the thoughtful allocation of those resources can create significant, immediate, and lasting change.

Though homelessness often co-presents with other significant health and economic challenges that interact in complex ways, the fundamental issue of homelessness is straightforward: a lack of stable housing. The solution to homelessness is similarly straightforward: stable housing for those who lack it. I recognize that this may seem trite, and I do not mean to suggest that emergency shelter is the first and last step in addressing the needs of those without housing, nor in addressing the prevalence of homelessness in our communities. However, emergency shelter is a critical, life-saving first step in addressing the urgent survival needs of people experiencing homelessness. As we can all observe during this frigid time of year, having a warm place to spend the night and connect to other services is a critical resource that can make the difference between life and death for people experiencing homelessness.

The City of Lewiston is currently without a public shelter for adults and is therefore in a unique position to observe the loss to communities if public shelters such as those that would be supported through this bill are not stewarded into the future with the resources they need. The Housing Committee has sought feedback from a diverse range of providers in our community to understand the scope of services available and where the gaps are. We have found that in Lewiston, the only overnight shelters in our community are privately operated by religious organizations. I do not mean in any way to demean the intentions nor the faith that drives these institutions. However, these shelters are not only borne of religious ideology, they also require religious observance from those who utilize their services. While there are no doubt many who are happy to receive these services with this stipulation, there are others – specifically those of other faiths and members of communities who have experienced alienation from religious

environments, especially some members of the LGBTQ+ community – who are unable to receive services from these organizations without consenting to a fundamental denial of their identity and basic human dignity. With these shelters operating as the *only* service providers who offer overnight shelter to adults in our community, many people experiencing homelessness in Lewiston are placed in an untenable position of choosing between their self-respect and identity and their immediate physical safety.

This takes on particular significance for me as I reflect on the overrepresentation of LGBTQ+ youth among young people experiencing homelessness, many of whom find themselves without parental support because their families have rejected them due to their sexual orientation and/or gender identity. According to a 2019 report by the Homelessness Policy Research Institute, “Estimates suggest that LGBTQ youth are anywhere from 2 to 13 times more likely to experience homelessness compared to heterosexual and cisgender youth (Coolhart & Brown, 2017). Studies also find that leaving home due to conflict with guardians over sexual orientation or gender expression is the primary reason for housing instability among LGBTQ youth (Choi et al., 2015). Once they leave home, LGBTQ youth experience higher rates of violence, physical and mental health degradation, and exploitation when compared to other youth experiencing homelessness. Given this disparity, housing researchers, policymakers, and service providers should pay special attention to this sub-group of the population experiencing homelessness in order to effectively combat their distinct outcomes.”

It strikes me as particularly cruel that these young people, after finding that they cannot abide by the erasure of their identity in their own family homes, may go on to experience the same debasement from private service providers because there are no other places for them to receive life-saving services. I recall one young person in particular who I worked with for many years at New Beginnings who, after aging out of our services at age 24, had just this experience, and who ultimately chose to remain homeless rather than experience what they felt to be essentially a coerced religious conversion. I understand there are some who believe that any individual who needs such critical survival resources such as overnight shelter should be willing to accept it in any form that it is made available. However, from a standpoint of both practicality and principle, I do not believe that delivering services in a manner that alienates the recipient of such services is a model that will yield positive long-term outcomes, nor a model that we should turn to as an alternative to public, secular services.

Should this body choose not to continue supporting public shelters in the State and rely instead on private organizations such as those in Lewiston to step into the vacuum, I expect the State will also see a significant negative impact on its ability to understand the scope of homelessness across Maine. We have learned through our research at the Housing Committee that private shelters in Lewiston do not participate in HUD’s annual Point in Time survey, nor do they report into the statewide HMIS (Homeless Management Information System) database. Without this type of federal or state-level reporting, individuals in Lewiston who are eligible for state and federal resources are currently unable to access them because they are not being identified as eligible for these services. This includes housing vouchers specifically for the chronically homeless, which are currently not being distributed in Lewiston because there is no ESHAP-participating public shelter in the City. Moreover, without a shelter that engages in this type of reporting, the City must rely on anecdotal data and informal counting by other service providers

in order to estimate the scope of homelessness in Lewiston. All of these factors make it difficult for the City to embark upon an evidence-based response to homelessness in Lewiston. I expect that the State of Maine would experience similar difficulties in data collection if public shelters are not preserved, and I worry that this would make it difficult for Maine to mount a data-driven response to homelessness that leverages federal resources tied to the Point in Time survey.

Emergency shelters have been uniquely impacted by COVID-19, with shelter workers being called upon to act as first responders in our community, tending to the needs of those without stable housing while also managing questions of testing, quarantine, and public health. At a time when delivering services in-person carries unusual risk, shelters have sought to keep their staff safe while also continuing to provide service to those who need it, and this balancing of priorities has cost shelters both time and resources. As emergency shelters are being looked to as critical public health resources helping to manage the spread of COVID-19, the staffing needs, health and safety resource requirements, and other budgetary concerns facing shelters means that these programs need additional financial support to continue their vital work and preserve their ability to serve the most vulnerable in our communities into the future.

LD 211 would provide vital resources to ESHAP shelters across the state that are in critical need of support in order to continue their operations. Should this Committee refuse to provide them with the resources they need to continue their work, many more communities in Maine may find themselves in the same position as Lewiston: relying upon private organizations to step in where public services are no longer available and losing access to state and federal resources for the homeless in the process.

It is my understanding that funding availability from the State has been a major consideration for Lewiston when it comes to creating a public shelter in the community. It is my hope that, by making more state resources available for ESHAP shelters, LD 211 may also serve as a starting point for the City of Lewiston to consider developing a public, ESHAP-participating shelter that could receive these funds in the future.

I thank you for your time today and urge you to vote yes on LD 211. Emergency shelters are a critical component of the infrastructure that supports our most vulnerable, and I ask you to affirm your support for their vital work by voting yes on LD 211 to give them the resources they need.