

TESTIMONY OF MEAGAN SWAY, ESQ.

An Act To Support Emergency Shelter Access for Persons Experiencing Homelessness

LD 211 - Ought To Pass

JOINT STANDING COMMITTEE ON LABOR AND HOUSING

February 17, 2021

Good morning Senator Rafferty, Representative Sylvester, and members of the Joint Standing Committee on Labor and Housing. My name is Meagan Sway and I am the policy director of the ACLU of Maine, a statewide organization of approximately 7,000 members. The ACLU is dedicated to the principles of liberty and equality embodied in the U.S. and Maine Constitutions. In furthering those principles, I am here today to urge you to vote “ought to pass” on LD 211.

LD 211 is simple and necessary: it would provide a modest \$3 million per year for low-barrier emergency homeless shelters. In a time of economic downturn amidst a pandemic, this support is needed more than ever to ensure every person in Maine has a roof over their heads at night.

We have already seen the rise in homelessness, with near record numbers of people seeking refuge at shelters.¹ And, because of public health best practice social distancing recommendations, shelters have been forced to reduce their bed numbers. As the pandemic continues, we can expect that an increase in housing and shelter resources will be needed.

Our homelessness crisis is intertwined with racial inequity and other forms of discrimination. Unhoused people are disproportionately people of color and people with disabilities. In 2019, for example, although Black and African American people made up less than 2% of Maine’s population, they made up 26% of Maine’s unhoused population.² More than 40% of people experiencing homelessness also

¹ See, e.g., David Marino Jr., Homelessness in Portland approaches record high amid pandemic, Bangor Daily News, Nov. 16, 2020, available at <https://bangordailynews.com/2020/11/16/news/portland/homelessness-in-portland-approaches-record-high-amid-pandemic/>.

² Maine Housing Maine Homelessness Survey: 2019 Point in Time Count, available at https://www.mainehousing.org/docs/default-source/housing-reports/2019-point-in-time-survey.pdf?sfvrsn=6d6fb415_4 (last accessed Feb. 15, 2021).

suffer from a mental illness,³ which is just one of the disabilities that people experiencing homelessness disproportionately suffer. This bill would provide increased support to people suffering multiple injustices.

Much more must be done by the state in order to address chronic homelessness, so that emergency shelters can, indeed, be emergency options rather than the only option available to many. Investments in housing and health care, to name two things, could go a long way to alleviating people who are chronically without a house. However, in the meantime, we must help those who need a place now, while other systems are being bolstered. For this reason, I urge you to vote *ought to pass* on LD 211.

Thank you.

³ *Id.*