

Testimony of Doug Dunbar from Hermon, Maine

In Support of LD 1116  
**An Act to Provide Rural Sober Living Housing for Mothers**

Public Hearing: April 25, 2023

Senator Tipping, Representative Roeder and members of the Committee on Labor and Housing, my name is Heidi Wheaton. I was born, raised and have returned to live in Millinocket Maine after being in the Central and Southern parts of this state for 40 years. I appreciate the opportunity to testify in support of LD 1116, An Act to Provide Rural Sober Living Housing for Mothers.

I am a woman who graduated from the University of Farmington Maine with a Bachelor of Science degree as a Rehabilitation Worker. I went on to obtain my License as a Social Worker during my career. I worked with various populations, including children, adolescents, developmentally disabled, Elderly, and crisis services. I had a career with Adult Protective Services working for the state for over 10 years prior to my addiction to alcohol taking control of my life. I lost my profession, resigned my professional license, lost my home, family, and almost my life before I was able to get sober.

At the age of 50 I began my journey in recovery. I returned to Maine and began picking up the pieces of my life. My daughter was grown but had chosen to walk away from our relationship and then I found out that she too had her own addiction. I was able to care for my grandson while she was in patient treatment, but she did not get selected to go into McCauley House as my grandson was over their age limit to be considered. I would not allow her to move back home until she had maintained her sobriety for a consistent period of time but did allow visits on the weekends. I saw the impact this had on her but also the impact it had on my grandson. He is 13 now and his mother has been sober for 5 years, and I have 11. Without the support I was able to give my daughter my grandson could have been a victim of the system.

8 Years ago, I began working for the Women's Project through Opportunity Alliance. For 2 ½ years I supported women who would be referred who are early in their sobriety who had children under the age of 6 years old. As an intensive Case Manager, the responsibilities ranged from Housing stabilization, reunification, vocation, pending legal matters, finding providers to meet their mental health, substance use disorder, physical, medically assisted treatment, specialists, educational, transportation, and financial goals. I supported women regaining custody of their children, stabilizing their addiction related issues, building a natural support system and then upon going into subsidized housing I saw them begin to relapse due to the infestation of drugs in this setting in various towns, cities and low-income housing projects. Lives would be ripped apart again, children removed and placed back into foster care traumatizing them even further and causing irreputable damage to this vulnerable population. During this time, I observed which programs were successful, and McCauley house in Portland had one of the highest success rates for women maintaining their sobriety, and reunification that

was long term. They offered apartments for women to stabilize their addiction and then integrate the children under a certain age into their lives again and support both of their needs.

I started Breaking the Cycle, a level three nonprofit recovery residency for women in Millinocket Maine 3 years ago with my daughter to offer the support needed to stabilize their addiction related issues. They are then encouraged to begin the reunification process with their children, families, while building a natural support system. Children visit on a rotating basis in our family room which holds up to 7 individuals so a child of any age can visit for a couple of days at a time.

I purchased a second apartment building with my retirement money so I could offer a step down to women who had completed this program successfully and wanted to remain in the area and have support with reunifying with their children. This has been successful for the past 2 years. Breaking the Cycle applied for a grant from Maine Housing recently to acquire a property that would allow 6 to 7 families of various sizes to move into an apartment as a part of a step-down process with a Day Care on the first floor but was not successful in obtaining any grant monies due to the timeliness that the project was supposed to be complete to help the homeless. The women that I serve come into my program from jails, institutions, battered shelters, have been trafficked, and abused. Their children are being bounced around in foster care, with various family members if they are lucky or with other individuals who may have addiction related issues. Breaking the cycles name was born when my grandson stood up at the age of 8 at an AA meeting and said Grammy can I say something and when given permission he said “ I want to be the one in our family that breaks the cycle.” To do this we must support these families. Getting sober is only one step in a number of many steps to support these mothers who by nature are loving, caring, nurturing caregivers when they are active in their recovery, but the obstacles they must endure to stabilize the children after having been traumatized and support Mom in gaining skills to meet the behavioral challenges, special needs, and or mental health related issues within this family is essential for their success. Not only do they need a sober environment to maintain their stability but also to heal as a family. Recovery Housing for women reuniting with their child of any age requires a slow supportive transition to set them up for success. At Breaking the Cycle our mission to develop this sober living environment and be able to offer more step-down housing to women with children and support their journey back into their lives. WE need housing to accomplish this. LD 1116 will allow us the ability to create this much needed housing. I am in support of LD1116 and would love to answer any questions you may have regarding my testimony.