



CITY OF BANGOR

Testimony of Orinda Fogler

Before the

**Joint Standing Committee on State and Local Government
In Support of LD 1300: An Act to Require County Governments to Coordinate with
Municipalities to Create Plans to Address Homelessness**

April 16, 2021

Representative Matlack and members of the Joint Standing Committee on State and Local Government. My name is Orinda Fogler, and I am the Assistant Director of Public Health and Community Services for the City of Bangor. In that role, I serve as the Director of the City's General Assistance program and also oversee our Homeless Outreach and Shelter Plus Care programs. I am testifying today on behalf of the City of Bangor in support of this proposal to require county governments to coordinate with municipalities to create plans to address homelessness

The impact of homelessness and housing insecurity can be felt all across Maine, but nowhere more so than in service center communities such as Bangor. In recent years, we have begun to stagger under the weight of an ever-increasing number of homeless youth, adults, and families arriving in our communities in search of shelter beds or stable housing. Some come of their own volition while others are sent here by smaller communities. Data gathered through the Homeless Management Information System and available through the Maine State Housing Authority indicates that upwards of seventy percent of shelter guests in our city list their most recent address as a municipality other than Bangor. They come from all corners of the state, but many are from communities here in Penobscot County.

During the summer of 2020, Bangor was home to over 125 unsheltered individuals, and this summer is shaping up to be the same. Our Department's homeless outreach caseworker worked closely with many and found that, as is the case with the shelters, a large majority of them were from other communities. We have documented cases of other communities within Penobscot County transporting homeless individuals to Bangor and dropping them, making their problem ours. Many of these individuals have multiple barriers to housing including untreated mental illness, substance use disorder, poor rental histories, and criminal records. Given that the vacancy rate for rental properties in Bangor is less than 1%, these individuals will likely be homeless for a very long time. They will tax our homeless outreach system, our police department, local hospitals and, perhaps, the corrections system.

This situation is unsustainable and unfair to people who deserve to be helped in their own community. Imagine finding yourself homeless and, instead of being helped by your own community, you're transported to an unfamiliar place with nothing but the clothes on your back and perhaps a few personal belongings. This happens all too frequently, and I believe requiring a county level response to homelessness can help alleviate this problem.

As you may be aware, Maine law dictates that each municipality maintain a General Assistance program that can respond to emergencies including homelessness. Ideally, General Assistance should step in and help individuals who are at risk of losing their housing or who have already found themselves facing homelessness. In far too many cases, however, these individuals are either sent or taken to the nearest service center community. Again, this is unfair to both the individual and to cities like Bangor.

In addition to the General Assistance program, Maine has a Statewide Homeless Council and three Regional Councils specifically organized for the purpose of addressing homelessness in Maine. The members of these bodies have a wealth of experience and could be of great assistance to county governments as they work with municipalities to establish protocols and implement a plan for addressing homelessness at the local level.

The homeless response system currently in place is ineffective and overly burdensome to service center communities who are now carrying a disproportionate cost of addressing homelessness in Maine. I truly believe the answer lies in a county-level approach where all communities are held accountable for caring for their own and there is a proportionate cost share across the county. LD 1300, which would require county governments to develop a homeless response plan in consultation with municipalities, the Statewide Homeless Council, and Regional Councils can help us make the system more effective and equitable.

Thank you very much for your time. Please don't hesitate to contact me at 207-992-4558 or at rindy.fogler@bangormaine.gov if I can be of further assistance.