

State of Maine | 131st Legislature
Joint Standing Committee on Housing
Testimony of Hannah A. Hudson on behalf of Maine Primary Care Association
January 23, 2024

Supporting:
LD 2138, “Resolve, to Improve Funding for Homeless Shelters”

Sponsored by Representative Madigan

Senator Pierce, Representative Gere, and members of the Joint Standing Committee on Housing, I am Hannah Hudson, Director of Policy at Maine Primary Care Association (MPCA). We are testifying in support of LD 2138 and thank Representative Madigan for bringing this legislation forward to increase the overnight bed rate of reimbursement for low-barrier shelters to \$90 per night.

MPCA is a membership organization representing Maine's Community Health Centers (CHCs), also known as Federally Qualified Health Centers (FQHCs). Maine's CHCs make up the largest independent primary care network in the state, providing high quality and equitable primary and preventive medical, behavioral, and dental health services for over 200,000 people (1 in 6 Mainers) at more than 80 service delivery sites around the State.

They are at the forefront of delivering care to rural and underserved Maine communities. Community Health Centers provide all patients with comprehensive primary care services, as well as a host of other services that include transportation, translation, and case management services, among others. They are further required to provide this care without regard to a patient's insurance status or ability to pay.

CHCs also serve as the backbone of primary care in Maine and provide essential behavioral health services, most especially for the state's vulnerable populations and across rural Maine. In 2022, this included providing care to over 7,800 patients experiencing homelessness.¹ It is critical that funding be allocated to low barrier shelters in the state, including those shelters that have a connection to Community Health Centers, such as the Hope House Health and Living Center in Bangor which is operated by Penobscot Community Health Care, and Nasson Health Care and Greater Portland Health's partnerships with shelters in York County and the Portland region.

Safe, stable housing leads to better health outcomes. There is strong evidence demonstrating that how we care for the needs of our homeless population has a direct impact on our healthcare systems. According to the National Health Care for the Homeless Council, “People who are homeless have higher rates of illness and die on average 12 years sooner than the general U.S. population.” Homelessness can create new health problems and exacerbates existing issues. Managing treatment for chronic conditions including diabetes and high blood pressure, addressing substance use disorders (SUD), and maintaining a healthy diet becomes incredibly difficult.² The care that CHCs provide for members of our communities across the state is more effective when a patient is stably housed.

Emergency shelters are the first stop for many on the road to stable, permanent housing. Low barrier shelters that accept someone regardless of whether they are sober or in recovery, are receiving treatment for mental illness, or have been involved in the criminal justice system are an incredibly

¹ <https://data.hrsa.gov/tools/data-reporting/program-data/state/ME/>

² <https://nhchc.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/08/homelessness-and-health.pdf>

important and necessary service for our state.³ There are only five low-barrier shelters in Maine, run by four organizations and all these shelters are currently at capacity.⁴ These facilities need to be provided with the necessary supports to ensure that access to the care and services they provide continues.

Thank you for considering our comments and for your work on this extremely important issue. MPCA and Maine's Community Health Center Network is available for any follow up questions. Please do not hesitate to contact me directly.

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³ <https://www.preblestreet.org/2023/11/30/funding-for-low-barrier-shelters/>

⁴ Bangor's Hope House Health & Living Center in Bangor, operated by Penobscot Community Health Center (PCHC); Waterville's Mid-Maine Homeless Shelter & Services (MMHSS); Portland's Milestone Recovery; Preble Street's Elena's Way Wellness Shelter, and Florence House Women's Shelter.