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 November 14, 2019  Dan Neumann

'Housing first' model to address homelessness rejected in Augusta

Advocates say state lawmakers are missing an opportunity to act on a new model being explored nationwide that could produce measurable results for Maine's chronically homeless population.

They are drawing attention to national and local research that shows it costs far less to place people who are chronically homeless into permanent housing and offer them comprehensive support than it does to continually pump money into the emergency rooms, shelters and jails that these individuals often bounce between.

Nearly 40 different communities around the country are already piloting a variety of “housing first” models to address homelessness. These programs target the small number of most vulnerable people (a few hundred in Maine) who frequently cycle through impermanent institutions and connect them with long-term supportive housing where they are also offered psychosocial and rehabilitative services.



Supportive housing projects such as the Cindy Cookson House in Ellsworth serve as long-term housing for some of Maine’s homeless population. | courtesy of Community Housing of Maine

This contrasts with the standard approach currently used in Maine where rehabilitative services are provided to a person while they are living in a temporary housing situation.

“These services work much better when people are stabilized in housing and not under the extreme stress of chronic homelessness — a situation so stressful that life expectancies are reduced by 20-25 years,” said Cullen Ryan, director of Community Housing of Maine, a nonprofit that advocates for supportive housing for homeless and special needs populations across the state.

Ryan and other advocates for the homeless seeking to bring this model here must first convince state lawmakers to hear their proposal, which they see as a viable solution to an urgent problem. Last month, Democratic and Republican leaders in the Maine House and Senate voted against placing the policy before state lawmakers next year.

“There’s a relatively small group of people who are essentially ricocheting between our most expensive emergency systems,” Ryan explained. “The jails are seeing the same people who keep coming and going for petty things. Emergency rooms, the same thing — they know them by name. Those people who are ricocheting between these systems often have serious and persistent mental illness. Sometimes they have substance use disorder. What we know is that if instead we were to house these people, they do very well, as long as they have adequate support.”

Redirecting public funds away from a criminal justice and emergency response

This year, Ryan’s organization consulted with state Rep. Victoria Morales (D-South Portland) on a bill, [LR 3086](#), to establish a Frequent Users Systems Engagement (FUSE) Collaborative in Maine. The proposal attempts to get the Maine State Housing Authority, the Department of Health and Human Services, the

Statewide Homeless Council, the County Jail System, and the Department of Corrections out of their individual silos and create a collaborative plan to redirect the public funds they are already putting into criminal justice and emergency responses towards a housing-first model.

But Morales' bill will not be heard next year when the state legislature reconvenes. Last month, the Democratically-controlled Legislative Council considered roughly 400 pieces of "emergency" legislation for the second session of 129th legislature, voting to move 133 forward. Morales' bill was not one of them.

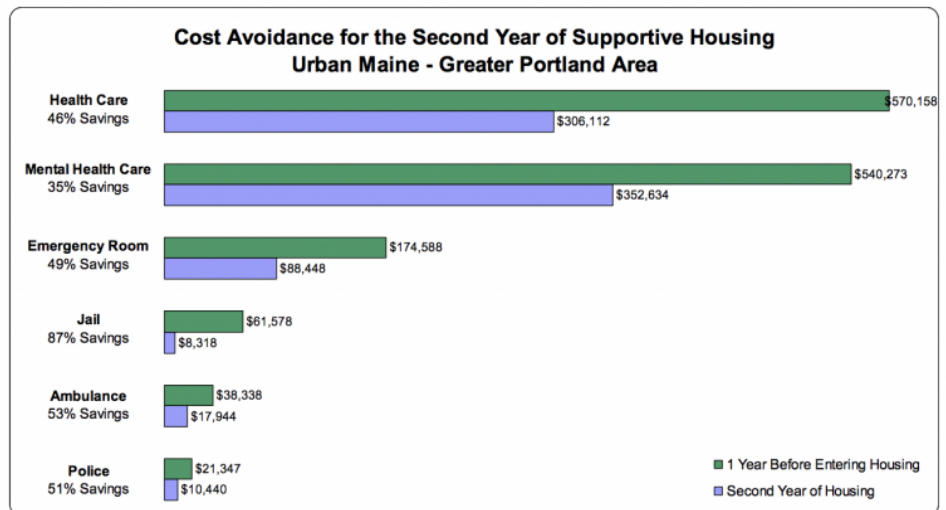
The council voted 9-1 to not advance the bill. Democratic majority leadership in the Maine Senate and House, including Troy Jackson, Sara Gideon, Nate Libby, Eloise Vitelli and Matt Moonen joined Republican minority leadership Dana Dow, Kathleen Dillingham, Trey Stewart and Jeff Timberlake in voting against the proposal. Only House Assistant Majority Leader Ryan Fecteau, a Democrat representing Biddeford, voted in favor.

FUSE networks are currently operating in major cities including New York, Los Angeles, San Francisco, Seattle and Boston. The proposal to implement FUSE in Maine is supported by the state's three Regional Homeless Councils, the Emergency Shelter Assessment Committee in Portland, and the Maine Continuum of Care.

Supportive housing reduced healthcare costs by 46 percent

The FUSE proposal for Maine relies on the findings of studies on the costs of homelessness in the state's **rural** and **urban** areas, where an estimated **2,516** people are experiencing homelessness on any given day.

In Maine, it costs \$47,000 per year, or \$903 per day, to jail one person. It costs \$14,400 per year to keep someone in the state's least expensive emergency shelter, Portland's Oxford Street Shelter. In contrast, it would cost just **\$11,876** per person per year for them to be stably housed with support services.



A 2009 **study** of 97 chronically homeless people in the greater Portland area found dramatic reductions in costs to the city after they moved into permanent supportive housing. Their healthcare costs were reduced by 46 percent, mental healthcare costs by 35 percent, emergency room costs by 49 percent, jailing costs by 87 percent, ambulance costs by 53 percent, and police costs by 51 percent.

"The numbers show that when you stably house someone with supportive services, they're 94 percent successful in remaining stable," Morales explained, "meaning they're not using the emergency rooms for

their healthcare anymore. They're actually benefiting from primary care. So they get better and they get healthier."

Morales is appealing the Legislative Council's decision to not advance the proposal to next year's legislative session.

"Hopefully, that will give them a chance to give it a second look," Ryan said.

(Top photo: Supportive housing on Gilman Street in Waterville. | courtesy of Community Housing of Maine.)



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ABOUT AUTHOR



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Dan studied journalism at Colorado State University before beginning his career as a community newspaper reporter in Denver. He reported on the Global North's interventions in Africa, including documentaries on climate change, international asylum policy and U.S. militarization on the continent before returning to his home state of Illinois to teach community journalism on Chicago's West Side. He now lives in Portland.

COMMENTS