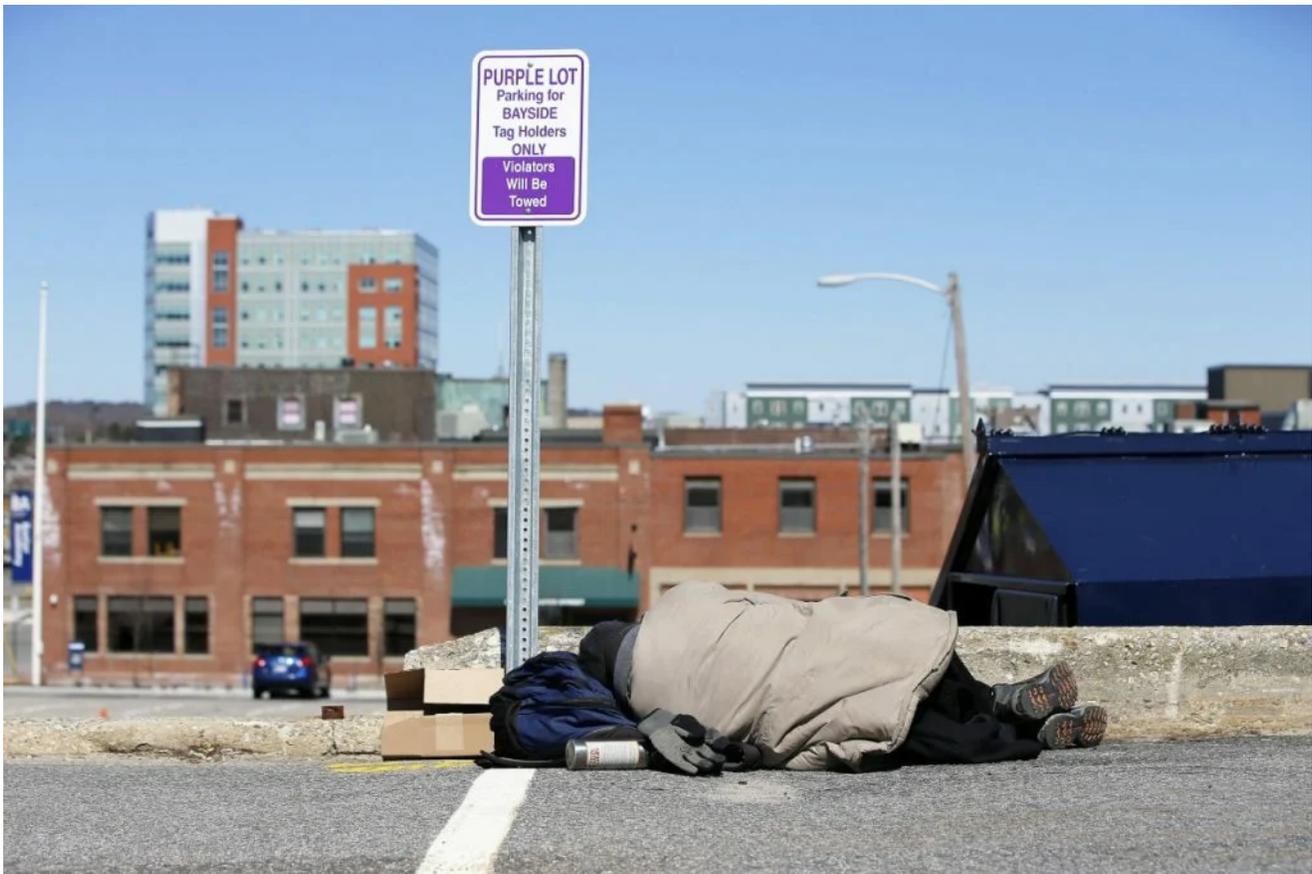


# Maine Voices: Why ‘smaller shelters’ means the status quo

[pressherald.com/2021/10/16/maine-voices-why-smaller-shelters-means-the-status-quo/](https://pressherald.com/2021/10/16/maine-voices-why-smaller-shelters-means-the-status-quo/)

By Cullen Ryan

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If you were experiencing homelessness in Portland, you would want to get out of it as quickly as possible. You would want a safe place to stay with all the resources you need right there to end your homelessness.

That is exactly what the City of Portland has planned.

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

**Cullen Ryan** is the executive director of Community Housing of Maine.

Working carefully and diligently with five years of public input on design and location, the city staff and City Council agreed on a thoughtfully designed Homeless Service Center. The goal is to surround people with everything they need to get housed and remain housed. The final recommendation passed the Council by a significant margin and has broad support – including from nearly all homeless service agencies.

Since then, there has been a politically charged effort to use this vote to drive a wedge through the City Council, and an attempt to stir up NIMBYism. The upcoming referendum question is a thinly veiled effort to undermine the success of the city's initiative.

Voters won't be well informed of the complexities. This is not a menu, with options like one larger or four or five smaller shelters, and this is not the, "what shall we do" phase. That was five years ago.

The idea of smaller shelters sounds good, and it will undoubtedly be labeled "the progressive choice". But it is actually *the most conservative choice* – because it would most certainly keep things exactly the same as they are now. It is a vote to maintain the status quo.

The biggest loser would be people experiencing homelessness who will be stuck without an effective homeless service center.

Requiring smaller shelters will mean that we *never move or replace* the Oxford Street Shelter, something that desperately needs to happen, and something upon which everyone agrees.

Here is why:

There will not be five communities that will welcome homeless shelters.

There will not be resources to pay for five individual shelters.

There will not be resources to staff five shelters – which would cost at least five times more than staffing one shelter.

There will not be five homeless service centers because it will be impossible for local non-profits to provide effective services at multiple locations – they simply lack the staff and time. But they could support one.

The signs for the smaller shelters campaign are notable, and not just because there is money for nice signs. There is a cute small building with a heart. It is as if we love having people in a shelter that is insufficient, and we love sending people wandering around the city on a scavenger hunt looking for the resources they desperately need, being preyed on along the way, while on display for the rest of us during their most challenging times.

People experiencing homelessness ought to be able to do so with dignity and respect in a safe, healthy, welcoming environment conducive to ending their homelessness. I've seen the City's design and it does exactly that.

As to location, of course Riverside has imperfections; any site will. However, it is not most important where someone spends a day or two or four (by far the most common lengths of stay). It's most important that people in an emergency have immediate and comprehensive access to everything they need to efficiently solve their emergency.

Our overarching goal is to get people housed – quickly and successfully. Making resources and housing a huge challenge to find will not get us there.

Insisting on multiple small emergency shelters for the same population throughout the City is not wise or feasible. And it will not help Portland move the needle on ending and preventing homelessness. It will likely do the exact opposite.

Having everything in one place just makes sense. Having an actual shelter that will *really be built* and *meet people's needs*, makes even more sense. Insisting on smaller shelters is insisting on doing nothing.

We all want to end homelessness. Let's do that and stop politicizing it. A vote for "C – neither" on this referendum question will best serve the population.

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