



COLUMNS

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Commentary: Housing will end homelessness, protect people from COVID-19

Federal aid can create permanent homes, provide support services and keep Mainers out of the places where they get infected.

BY RACHEL TALBOT ROSS AND CULLEN RYAN SPECIAL TO THE PRESS HERALD

For all the challenges that COVID-19 has brought us, it also offers opportunities. Take homelessness, for example. The pandemic has shined a spotlight on the vulnerability of people in congregate settings. Heroic work was done quickly across the state to spread people out into other settings, including unusually empty hotels and gymnasiums, where people experiencing homelessness could feasibly practice social distancing and/or quarantining and be kept safe.

But the temporary nature of these facilities is also troubling. When the pandemic recedes, those settings will inevitably revert to serve their previous functions. And that will put us right back to square one – people stuck in overcrowded congregate settings or in encampments again, just in time for a second wave of the virus, or perhaps worse.

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

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We have an opportunity to do better, and we could seize this opportunity to create a permanent fix. We could permanently house people – using funds sent

to the states to protect people experiencing homelessness – by creating permanent housing with support services. This would create a much-needed “back door” for homeless shelters, something that is severely lacking.

That housing would dramatically help people now concentrated in homeless shelters and jails and outside in unsanitary conditions. We could keep people safe and end their homelessness at the same time.

We have no place to put people. Maine has a shortage of affordable housing, and an even more significant shortage of [permanent supportive housing](#) – the evidence-based intervention involving affordable housing enriched with support services to ensure success.

Permanent supportive housing is ideal for people stuck in homelessness for very long periods of time. It produces stability in [94 percent](#) of the target [population](#), which is remarkable considering that the population [tends to ricochet](#) through the most expensive emergency systems when they are homeless. Housing them could [empty shelters, unclog emergency rooms and hospitals and empty jails](#) of petty offenders who are in these places only because they have nowhere else to go.

Widespread COVID-19 diagnostic testing within homeless shelters and correctional facilities is lacking; however, when populations in these congregate settings have been universally tested, it has produced shocking results. At a homeless shelter in Worcester, Massachusetts, where universal testing was implemented, [43 percent of shelter guests](#) tested positive for COVID-19. [Even larger percentages](#) of incarcerated populations have tested positive. And recently in Bangor, testing in a homeless shelter revealed [an alarming 20 cases](#). Housing these populations would greatly assist in stopping the spread of COVID-19 and it would help eliminate recidivism.

This is an extremely important time to create permanent pathways to safety and stability. In Maine, we have such a lack of affordable housing and supportive housing that people with rental subsidies are unable to find housing or other places to use them. We need to take urgent steps now to correct that.

And we can begin that effort right now. The funding Maine received strategically included this type of option.

The Maine Statewide Homeless Council and the Maine Continuum of Care together sent a letter to Gov. Mills suggesting that a portion of the Coronavirus Relief Fund ([\\$1.25 billion to Maine](#)) be set aside for the production and establishment of supportive housing to end homelessness (especially for people experiencing long-term homelessness and people with disabilities).

Housing is a social determinant of health. Our ability to create a successful behavioral health system in Maine depends on our ability to expand affordable and supportive housing for people who need it.

The Relief Fund can be used only to offset costs associated with COVID-19 and must be incurred before Dec. 30. In order to extend the benefits from this funding, the letter encourages the governor to enter into contracts for construction, rehabilitation, rental assistance and social services before Dec. 30 (incurring the costs), because doing so would allow for cash disbursements into 2021 or beyond.

Let's use this terrible situation to do some permanent good – keep people safe and end homelessness for a population that urgently needs it. We can all feel better about that.

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