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  December 7, 2019  Dan Neumann

## Legislative leaders reverse course, advance 'housing first' approach to homelessness

The Democratically-controlled Legislative Council decided Friday to take up a bill in the coming session that would establish a pilot program to provide long-term housing for a number of Mainers without homes, who instead regularly cycle through the state's emergency rooms, shelters and jails.

The 10-member leadership council **voted 9-1 in October** not to advance the bill. On Friday, that decision was reversed upon appeal. The 7-3 decision was made with support from Democrats Senate President Troy Jackson, House Speaker Sara Gideon, Sens. Nate Libby and Eloise Vitelli, Reps. Matt Moonen and Ryan Fecteau, along with Republican Rep. Trey Stewart.

State Rep. Victoria Morales (D-South Portland), sponsor of **LR 3086**, which would create the Frequent Users Systems Engagement (FUSE) Collaborative in Maine, told the council Friday, “FUSE targets the 1 percent who use 30 percent of our resources. Without FUSE, things will stay the same. Our emergency systems will all be busy, stretched thin, and in crisis with the same people overwhelming them — because they will stay in crisis indefinitely — and we will continue to spend between \$500,000 and \$1 million per individual.”

Supporters say FUSE could help 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 public funds spent on criminal justice and emergency response toward a housing-first model, where those who most often come into contact with these institutions, or “frequent flyers,” are offered psychosocial and rehabilitative services.

Nearly **40 different communities** around the country are currently piloting a variety of “housing first” models to address homelessness.

During her appeal, Morales explained to the council how the model would work: “Twenty obvious frequent flyers are housed. Real statistics are drawn from these individuals demonstrating the cost savings of permanent supportive housing for these 20 people. Then those findings are brought to each of the siloed systems and when their individual budgets are created, that data is used to have them proactively reallocate a portion of their budgets to housing the next 20,” she said in her remarks, adding, “This is a slow catalyst for system change, and it will not change without a collaborative, coordinated effort like FUSE.”

“The purpose of the second legislation session, for better or worse, is to consider all carryover measures and bills approved by the legislative council that merit emergency consideration,” President Jackson told *Beacon* by email. “Today, Rep. Morales made the case that this housing bill fits the criteria to be considered in the upcoming session and a bipartisan group of council members agreed. I look forward to learning more about what this bill could mean for Mainers.”

Morales’ housing-first plan, which has no fiscal note attached, must first survive a committee vote when state lawmakers return to Augusta early next year as well as floor votes in the Maine House and Senate before it could be implemented.

“I am beyond thrilled to begin working with our first responders, hospitals, and sheriffs to provide supportive housing for Maine’s chronically homeless population,” said Morales after Friday’s vote.

*Photo: Supportive housing on Gilman Street in Waterville. | courtesy of Community Housing of Maine*

## ABOUT AUTHOR



**Dan Neumann** 222 posts

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.

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