

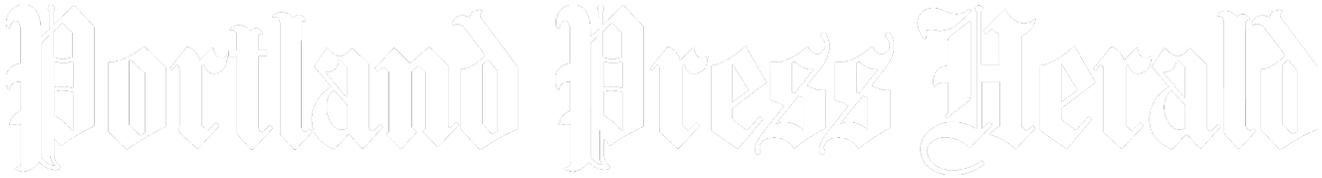
# Commentary: It's time to house Maine people who are ill

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By Victoria Morales and Cullen Ryan Special to the Press  
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There are a small number of people in Maine who are known, by name, by many of us. We see them often daily in our hospitals, homeless shelters and emergency medical systems, and we know them well in our police stations, courthouses and our jails. And because all these different, expensive emergency systems are isolated from one another and stretched thin with lots of crises, our system fails to solve the obvious underlying problem for each of these people:

They are ill and they have no place to live.

## ABOUT THE AUTHORS

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**Victoria Morales** is a Democratic state representative from South Portland, and **Cullen Ryan** is executive director of Community Housing of Maine.

And while unhoused, they ricochet through our most expensive emergency systems. Sometimes for decades.

We can do better. We need to do better.

An approach called Frequent Users Systems Engagement has worked in nearly 40 other states and communities, and we want to bring this to Maine.

FUSE is designed to pull all systems together to house people experiencing chronic and long-term homelessness, one at a time. It works like this: Twenty obvious candidates are housed. Real statistics are drawn from these individuals demonstrating the cost savings of permanent supportive housing (affordable housing enriched with support services) for these 20 people. Those data are used proactively to promote strategic systemic funding allocations for housing and services to stabilize more people.

This eventually changes the way we handle people who are ill and have no place to live.

Today, 30 percent of our resources are being spent on 1 percent of our population because they remain homeless.

Changing this will take a collaborative, coordinated effort like FUSE.

Once people are housed, they stop ricocheting through our most expensive systems. Jails will not be overcrowded with the same people. Homeless shelters will not be overcrowded with the same people. Hospitals and emergency rooms will not be overcrowded with the same people. Law enforcement and EMS personnel will be able to focus on the general population rather than primarily the same small group of people. And we will all save money.

Fourteen years ago, Malcolm Gladwell chronicled the life of one person experiencing homelessness in a New Yorker article titled "Million Dollar Murray." Fourteen years later, we still have our own Million Dollar Murrrays in Maine. We will continue to have them for the next 14 years, because they will be in constant and indefinite crisis, completely overwhelming our systems in a redundant, predictable and extremely inefficient pattern, if they stay homeless.

This cycle will not stop unless we actually stop it.

We know the solution. If we place these particular people in permanent housing with adequate support, they do well. They begin seeing primary care providers just like we do, rather than being seen only in emergency rooms. If they drink or act upset, they do so in the dignity and privacy of their own homes rather than being arrested for displaying this in public. They improve simply because they stop being homeless.

This is no surprise; no one does well without housing, and everyone does better with housing.

Stable housing allows people to get better, and when people who are ill are housed, taxpayers save a lot of money.

People working to support this effort include Democratic Hallowell Rep. Charlotte Warren, House chair of the Criminal Justice and Public Safety Committee; Troy Morton, Penobscot County sheriff; Kevin Joyce, Cumberland County sheriff; Jonathan Sahrbeck, district attorney for Cumberland County; and Natasha Irving, district attorney for Sagadahoc, Lincoln, Waldo and Knox counties. The Statewide Homeless Council also endorses this approach.

Together, we are insisting on this change in Maine. We must become proactive rather than reactive. FUSE puts us on the course to do exactly that. It will help us focus our efforts together, eliminating silos. It works, improves our communities and makes for better lives.

Let's invest our resources more effectively. Let's redirect resources to housing this small group of people so we can all do better.

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