

Janet T. Mills
Governor

Jeanne M. Lambrew, Ph.D.
Commissioner



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May 9, 2024

Simonne Maline, Executive Director
Consumer Council System of Maine
219 Capitol St, Suite 7
Augusta, ME 04330

Dear Ms. Maline,

Thank you for your issue statement dated January 22, 2024 regarding a critical shortage of stable housing and related services. The primary issue pertains to the identification by the Farmington Local Council of a statewide lack of availability of permanent, stable housing and related services including resource navigation and case management. Additional issues include higher rates of incarceration for individuals diagnosed with mental health challenges as well as case management staffing relating to workforce shortages and burnout impacting the provision of and access to services.

The first two recommendations from the Council pertain to the equitable and comprehensive delivery of housing, resource navigation, case management, and re-entry services throughout the state to address identified disparities. As proposed, this may include additional PATH navigators alongside case managers and ensuring they frequent all peer recovery centers, clubhouses, warming centers, and shelters. The fifth recommendation is focused on increasing staffing of intensive case managers (ICMs) in jail facilities and for individuals transitioning back into the community.

- The PATH outreach plan provides for navigators to frequent places where individuals in need of assistance may go, including shelters, warming centers, general assistance, and municipal offices. Emergency departments and recovery centers are often also part of the outreach plan as PATH assists those experiencing unsheltered homelessness who are not supported by mainstream mental health programs or who may not have access to such resources and services. Provider staff and subcontractors utilize these relationships and partnerships to collect information about where homeless individuals are, and how best to engage them in available services, and PATH providers are supportive of furthering the statewide concerted efforts toward those recommendations. PATH is committed to comprehensive service coordination with community partners and collaboration to support community members in accessing the most appropriate services at the most appropriate times and work closely with Maine's nine statewide service hubs.
- More specifically, regarding PATH and mental or behavioral health collaboration, seven of the twelve peer recovery centers throughout the state reported moderate to high

connection with PATH, two more limited, and three are pending updated information. The seven most connected are in Portland, Augusta, Rumford, Brewer, and Ellsworth encompassing various regions of the state, while the two more limited are in Caribou and Madawaska. While all refer as necessary, OBH recovery staff has offered to further facilitate introductions and build connections in the more limited or unconnected regions to achieve greater coverage.

- OBH currently has a team of 24 ICMs located throughout the state in both carceral and community settings and continue to monitor resources and opportunities for expansion while leveraging our current ICM workforce to the greatest extent. ICM staff continue to provide considerable support to clients with severe and persistent mental illness and co-occurring disorders who are involved with, or at risk of, involvement with the criminal justice system. While ICMs are intended to serve clients from 30 to 120 days with a goal of establishing community services for longer-term, ongoing care, the services Maine ICMs provide regularly extend beyond the standard to provide support until community-based connections are secured. They also consistently engage with assertive community outreach teams in efforts to locate and support more individuals in need of behavioral health services, including referrals to resources such as housing, PNMI, mental health and SUD treatment, voucher programs, insurance and benefit applications, and transportation.
- Providers have however identified similar barriers and concerns that are not always within OBH's purview, including staffing challenges, mainstream resource waitlists, decreased access to vouchers, filling service gaps longer than intended, and balancing caseloads with immediate crisis needs.

The third recommendation pertains to concerns that housing navigators will lose their existing funding due to expire in 2025. The Council recommends that the Department advocate for not only the continuation of this funding and these services but also expansion of the program.

- The Department recognizes the importance and value of services provided by housing navigators and will continue advocating for funding to support the work performed and services provided. The current PATH contract was extended to June 30, 2024 and allowed for small increases in service resources based on agency-identified needs. The next contract will be for a two-year period and may allow for similar flexibility.
- Additionally, the Housing First Fund will allocate \$1 million annually to support scattered site housing first models throughout the state which will encompass outreach and related services beginning in July 2025.

The Council further recommends that educational resources and training be expanded throughout the state with reference to existing resources and training offered by shelters and community action programs on a more limited basis, with an example of Rent Smart.

- The Department respectfully encourages the Council to collaborate with community action programs, housing counseling agencies, tenant advocacy agencies (e.g., Pine Tree Legal), Maine State Housing Authority¹, Rental Alliance of Southern Maine², Maine universities, and others to discuss the expansion of Rent Smart and development of similar educational opportunities. Some municipalities such as Portland and Yarmouth³ have rental housing advisory and affordable housing committees which could be engaged and explored as examples of existing education and resource systems to build from.

Lastly, the Council's final recommendation is utilization of the annual county-specific Community Needs Assessments to address disparities in services for mental health and housing, advising the data should be applied to bolstering actions by the State in greater provision of services.

- Recent legislative sessions have produced several bills that address many of the concerns in the local assessments, including the expansion of crisis receiving centers to provide greater access to services and in more regions of the state. Other legislation recently signed into law ensures SUD treatment programs are available statewide and in rural areas.
- OBH has engaged in strategic planning to prioritize SUD services including the OPTIONS expansion, adding recovery coaches to teams and new liaisons to eleven counties with the greatest needs. Their work is an example of our efforts to promote awareness, understanding, connect individuals experiencing homelessness with services, and provide more support to those in need of services. Anti-stigma campaigns, transportation, and enhancements for alcohol treatment education are part of this initiative and all align with aspects in the needs assessment reports. Between October 2021 and August 2023, OPTIONS liaisons have provided more than 12,000 referrals for community-based treatment, medical treatment, patient navigation, and related services. Furthermore, OBH held medication management stakeholder sessions last year to explore improvements with service provision and continues similar work in other areas of mental and behavioral health services.
- New awards were issued for SUD treatment and capacity, MARR residences have increased, and 321 individuals were served by the newly designed recovery residence subsidy program launched last July.
- Offices within DHHS, including OADS and Maine CDC perform needs assessments to evaluate health needs and develop informed planning to address such needs, including mental or behavioral health and housing disparity (e.g., housing insecurity, excessive rental or housing costs). OBH would be happy to explore these and other

¹ [rental-housing-guide.pdf \(mainehousing.org\)](#)

² [Rental Housing Alliance of Southern Maine - About \(smlmaine.com\)](#)

³ [Rental Housing Advisory Committee | Portland, ME - Official Website \(portlandmaine.gov\)](#) and [Affordable Housing Committee \(yarmouth.me.us\)](#)

existing community assessments to further discuss with the Council key indicators for internal review of actionable steps that may be available and appropriate.

The Council's expected outcome of a statewide concerted effort to prioritize the immediate needs of individuals without housing and other supports is that these individuals will have greater long-term success in the communities of their choice and to successfully progress through their recovery journeys. The Department stands with the Council's position on the need for housing and related supports for individuals in all areas and in various stages of their recovery and life cycles and have conferred with providers to identify barriers and concerns for further discussions toward that goal. Recommendations discussed include staffing and long-term employment retention, clarity of scope of the PATH program from community referral partners, mainstream resource waitlists, greater accessibility of rental assistance vouchers not yet extended to PATH, long-term homeless system supports beyond PATH's standard service provision, and balancing caseloads and immediate needs such as crisis intervention. We would appreciate the opportunity to work together on the Council's and providers' recommendations and hope to utilize one of our next meetings to further discuss these issues and potential solutions toward an improved system of care.

Sincerely,

Sarah Squirrell

Sarah Squirrell

Director

Office of Behavioral Health

Department of Health and Human Services