

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 February 23, 2024, regarding encampment sweeps and the traumatic impact of these actions, as well as the need for more solutions to the lack of affordable, accessible housing throughout the state. The Department agrees there is a need for long-term housing solutions and that individuals deserve to live in an environment of their choice that is safe and supportive. We also support the Council's statement that individuals living in encampments should have their voices heard when creating solutions for the lack of affordable housing and welcome their opinions and suggestions throughout the process.

The Council outlined seven recommendations for which responses are provided below. Please note that the response under recommendation five serves to conjointly address numbers two through five due to the similar nature of the issues and potential pathways toward resolution.

1. Housing First [Model and Program].
 - As acknowledged by the Council, the Program will take time for implementation. DHHS and Maine State Housing Authority began strategic planning in 2023 and continue working diligently and collaboratively on development and future implementation and are dedicated to ensuring the Program is operational as soon as practicable.
2. Communities should provide encampments with basic facilities like water, trash removal, and a bathroom.
3. There needs to be robust services provided to all who are living outside. This should include medical services offered at encampments.
 - It may be beneficial to involve hospital systems, universities, and/or local municipalities as other states have employed similar relationships to provide medical services at encampments.¹

¹ Various counties in California; Boston, MA; and King County, Washington are some examples of multiple governmental and non-governmental entities partnering together on a unified approach to addressing these issues.

4. We should have a ban on sweeps at the very least that does not allow for sweeps in the winter/cold weather unless there is a citywide plan to support all individuals in need of public shelters/housing programs.
5. Humanitarian aid: there should be a one-stop shop approach to access basic human needs. Often the systems society set up are complex, difficult to access, and mired in bureaucratic red tape. We need to fundamentally make our systems easy to access and receive basic needs. There should be no wrong door to access all housing options.
 - We respectfully encourage the Council to engage organizations and entities such as the Continuum of Care Leadership, State Homeless Council, and Maine State Housing Authority, and OBH would be happy to join discussions alongside our community partners to collaborate on potential resolutions of the broader issues as appropriate. It may also be beneficial to approach certain issues and recommendations individually, engaging the relevant entities with authority over those matters for more direct solutions, planning and implementation.
 - Though some existing services and programs offered by the Department align with aspects of these recommendation including assertive community treatment (ACT) teams, case management, voucher and application assistance, greater collaboration would be necessary to achieve an expansion of service provision, particularly with regard to direct medical care.
 - We believe it is equally important to remember and consider the need for local municipalities' involvement in pursuing the Council's recommendations as the Department, CCSM, and above organizations lack the authority to adequately address all the proposed solutions. A meeting between our partners would serve as a foundation to build from, but we will ultimately need the agreement and buy-in of our local governments to implement many of the Council's recommendations.
6. BRAP/Shelter + Care² vouchers should be offered by all staff working with individuals living in encampments who qualify for them and support them in successfully using these vouchers.
 - Shalom House instituted a partial waitlist on Priority 3³ BRAP applications effective February 3, 2024, primarily in response to an unprecedented increase in demand, especially in quarter four of 2023⁴. Priority 3 applicants can still apply, and if deemed eligible, will be placed on the waitlist and prioritized by length of time homeless with vouchers awarded accordingly once additional resources become available.
 - During this time, Shalom House and LAAs will continue monitoring the waitlist and communicate with individuals on the list to determine updated need and housing status. Processing of all applications received prior to the effective date of

² Shelter + Care is now known as the Permanent Supportive Housing Program (PSHP).

³ Literally homeless as defined by HUD.

⁴140% increase in applications and demand.

the waitlist will still be completed in good faith by the LAAs, and PATH⁵ teams continue to provide applications and services without disruption.

- If the Council or your partners become aware of individuals in need of applications who have not received one, please notify a PATH provider for assistance, and subsequently OBH as necessary.
7. DHHS/OBH may need to ask for additional funds for the BRAP program if existing funding is exhausted.
- The Department continues to monitor demand and access trends in light of the federal funding constraints and regularly evaluates opportunities for additional resources.

BRAP and PSHP are the two lowest barrier options and resources available to those most in need of housing assistance which often results in overutilization of the programs. For context, Priority 3 demand increased each quarter, ultimately accounting for 57.6% of all BRAP vouchers in 2023. The demonstrated surge in demand for and subsequent strain on the program further supports the need for additional collaboration among various entities and organizations to address the housing challenges and ensure alternative resources and opportunities are available, providing a wider safety net for these most vulnerable populations.

We recognize there is more to be done to address access to affordable and stable housing and remain committed to expanding upon the existing programs and services through strategic planning and coordination of available resources to the extent possible. As suggested, organizations such as Maine State Housing Authority may be a valuable partner in providing other alternatives, including evaluating programs and funding that could supplement the Department's existing work and initiatives. Addressing these issues in a truly meaningful and comprehensive manner will require a broader approach, and we therefore suggest first planning the aforementioned initial meeting with OBH, Maine State Housing Authority, the Continuum of Care Leadership, State Homeless Council, CCSM, and any other organizations to discuss priorities, potential avenues, and existing programs and resources we can collectively leverage as we work toward longer-term solutions (e.g., Housing First) and municipality engagement. This may also present an opportunity to discuss how our partners can better promote the Continuum of Care's open membership for direct participation from those most impacted by these issues to express their voices firsthand and contribute to our shared ambitions and future plans toward our common goal of ensuring safe, affordable and accessible housing for Mainers.

Sincerely,

Sarah Squirrell

Sarah Squirrell

Director

Office of Behavioral Health

Department of Health and Human Services

⁵ Projects for Assistance in Transition from Homelessness