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Dear Senator Gratwick, Representative Hymanson and distinguished members of the Joint Standing Committee on Health and Human Services,

I am Senator Shenna Bellows representing Senate District 14, which includes the towns of Chelsea, Farmingdale, Gardiner, Hallowell, Manchester, Monmouth, Pittston, Randolph, Readfield, West Gardiner and Winthrop. I am here today to present to you LD 1523, "An Act To Ensure the Quality of and Increase Access to Recovery Residences."

As you well know, drug overdoses declined in 2018 but remain at historic levels. Drug overdose deaths in Maine continue to average one person nearly every day. Governor Mills has rightfully dedicated significant resources to addressing this crisis because there's no question it's reached emergency proportions.

Two years ago a constituent approached me about proposing legislation to ensure that Mainers who do the hard work of detoxing from an opioid addiction and decide to stay on that path to recovery are safe when they sign up for and move into a "recovery residence." After meeting with him and learning more about recovery residences, I knew I had to act. We all have heard over and over again, recovering from a substance use disorder is hard, hard work and it is incumbent upon us as legislators to ensure Mainers have the best supports we can offer them.

Too many people get out of detox and have nowhere to go but back to the living and social situations they were in before, making it harder for them to resist a relapse of their substance use. Some of those people may also want or need the additional supports a recovery residence offers.

There are remarkable recovery residences in our state doing important, hard work to help people in their path to recovery. You will hear from some of them today, and I deeply appreciate their work to help Maine confront substance abuse. At the same time, there are unscrupulous individuals who may take advantage of a family or an individual's desperation. In researching what's happening nationally, I discovered that in some states, the lack of standards for recovery residences has led to tragedy. Overdose deaths in Florida, New York and Pennsylvania have been attributed to living situations that were billed as recovery residences but turned out to be unsafe and exploitative environments that took advantage of individuals and families seeking help. In Pennsylvania, legislators reported concerns about drug dealers using the concept of recovery homes to exploit residents and fuel their addictions. We need to make sure that never happens in our state.

By taking action this year, we can help individuals and families on the path to recovery and avoid tragedy.

This bill directs the Department of Health and Human Services to establish a voluntary certification process for recovery residences. It is substantially similar to a compromise worked through with stakeholders in the 128th legislature that died in Appropriations for lack of funding. I remain as committed today as I was then to working with stakeholders to get the language right to work for Maine and support the underlying goal of creating statewide standards for recovery residences. This recommendation was adopted unanimously by the bipartisan Opioid Task Force because recovery residences are such an important tool in the path to recovery.

The second portion of LD 1523 directs Maine State Housing Authority to create a pilot project to provide a short-term rental subsidy to a person recovering from substance use disorder to reside in a certified recovery residence that provides medication-assisted treatment. Other states have created separate funding streams for recovery beds. This is vital. We need to ensure that recovery resources are available to low-income families as well as those with the ability to pay.

We know that ending this epidemic will not happen with any one bill on its own. LD 1523 is part of the larger solution. Ensuring that people have access to quality recovery residences is vital. I urge you to work with me to pass an amended version of LD 1523 that reflects the needs of this community and will help to ensure quality of recovery houses in our state.