RESOLUTION CALLING ON THE STATE TO ESTABLISH A HOMELESSNESS MANAGEMENT TASK FORCE

WHEREAS, the number of individuals and families seeking Emergency Shelter in Portland and in Maine has increased dramatically since the Summer of 2020 and has reached unprecedented levels; and

WHEREAS, the City of Portland is currently providing emergency shelter for approximately 1,700 people, 1,200 of whom are Asylum Seekers; and

WHEREAS, Asylum Seekers continue to arrive on a daily basis in Portland and the State of Maine; and

WHEREAS, Asylum Seekers enter the United States legally through a process established by the federal government, but have no federal resources following them in order to assist with their entry into the United States; and

WHEREAS, federal law limits the ability of newly arrived Asylum Seekers to work for at least 365 days; and

WHEREAS, legal principles relating to preemption prohibit states or local governments from enacting laws that would allow Asylum Seekers to work any sooner than federal law allows; and

WHEREAS, despite local restrictions on work authorizations, the State of Maine has made General Assistance and other public benefits available for Asylum Seekers “pursuing a lawful process,” for immigration relief; and

WHEREAS, the emergency assistance required to support newly arrived Asylum Seekers includes services and supports beyond the financial benefits contemplated by State law; and

WHEREAS, in September, 2021, the City of Portland began communicating the urgent need for additional help and coordination regarding funding for, management of, and shelter locations for all people in need of emergency shelter, including Asylum Seekers; and
WHEREAS, beginning in March 2019, Covid-19 physical distancing protocols presented significant challenges in the City’s ability to provide emergency shelter in congregate settings to individuals and families experiencing homelessness; and

WHEREAS, during the height of Covid-19 infection rates, the City utilized local hotel rooms to expand its capacity to provide emergency shelter during a time when its congregate shelters were operating at reduced capacities; and

WHEREAS, City staff resources are limited both in terms of municipal funding and human resources capacity; and

WHEREAS, operating multiple emergency shelter sites, including area hotels as well as the City’s Oxford Street Shelter and Family shelter, has long exceeded available City resources and is no longer sustainable; and

WHEREAS, the ability to choose where one resides is a choice that should be left to an individual based on each individual or family’s unique preferences rather than on the singular availability of food, shelter, and other basic necessities in a single municipality or state; and

WHEREAS, funding, the availability of temporary emergency shelter, and access to resettlement and permanent housing services are solutions that require coordination at every level of government, federal, state, regional and local alike; and

WHEREAS, all Maine municipalities, as well as county government, the Maine Legislature, the Governor’s office, state agencies such as Health and Human Services, Maine Emergency Management Agency, Maine State Housing, the Office of Policy Innovation and Future, Maine Department of Education, Maine Economic Development, and the Federal government must be involved in problem solving; and

WHEREAS, this problem solving should include, but not be limited to, review and revision of Maine’s General Assistance law in order to address inequities and lack of clarity regarding municipal responsibilities; and

WHEREAS, 79 non-governmental organizations (NGOs), with expertise in immigration services delivery and policy in Maine, also communicated a request for immediate action on May 20, 2022, and specifically agree that a state-level task force must be created to quickly identify and coordinate emergency and temporary housing and other services, identify and distribute additional state funding in support of emergency, temporary and long-term housing, ensure that resources distributed across municipalities are used effectively, and serve as a central location to gather information and data for next steps;
NOW, THEREFORE, BE IT RESOLVED that we, the City Council and the Mayor of the City of Portland, call on the Governor of the State of Maine to immediately establish a Task Force engaging a broad stakeholder group, including but not limited to elected and professional staff representatives from federal, state, county and municipal governments, state and local health and human services departments, emergency management teams, non-governmental organizations including those that work with immigrant clients and homeless populations, the legal community, and real estate developers and managers to review, address, and make improvements to state and local responses to homelessness by:

1) revising the State’s General Assistance law to, among other things, either regionalize the administration of public benefits, or set a threshold minimum level of assistance that each individual municipality must provide;

2) establishing a State resettlement office to assist individuals and families experiencing homelessness to locate emergency shelter and long-term housing;

3) establishing a statewide emergency shelter system that will serve individuals and communities throughout the State of Maine; and

4) addressing issues impacting people experiencing homelessness including, but not limited to, access to mental health services, education, workforce training, and permanent housing.