

City of Portland | Executive Department



**To:** Members of the Portland City Council  
**From:** Kate Snyder, Mayor  
Danielle P. West, Interim City Manager  
**Date:** June 5, 2023  
**Re:** Correspondence to Governor Janet Mills

As you know, our City continues to be overwhelmed by a public demand for emergency shelter and housing. While we have and will continue to creatively leverage the resources at our disposal, we need coordination, policy change, and support at the State level to effectively respond to the crisis at hand.

Enclosed is a letter to Governor Mills describing our challenges, efforts, and request for help. Specifically, we ask for:

- The development of State-level capacity to coordinate services for asylum seekers;
- Additional shelters throughout Maine to meet the emergency shelter needs of all Mainers; and
- Support of and funding for LD 1644, to support an increase in General Assistance reimbursement.

We are aware of community concerns regarding the proliferation of encampments on public property, and share those concerns. On Tuesday, June 13, from 5:30 - 8:00 PM, the City Council and City Manager will host an in-person listening and information session to hear directly from residents (both housed and unhoused), businesses, and other members of our community. We will open the time together by sharing information about the City's multifaceted response to the myriad issues, and welcome any and all suggestions or creative solutions.

**City of Portland**  
Kate Snyder, *Mayor*  
Danielle P. West, *City Manager*  
June 2, 2023



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The Honorable Janet T. Mills  
Governor  
State of Maine  
210 State Street  
Augusta, ME 04333

Dear Governor Mills,

Thank you for your work to lead the State of Maine through so many challenges and opportunities. It was good to see you in your office on March 21st. We appreciated the time you spent with us, and the brainstorming we did together regarding housing and homelessness including the availability of state owned facilities as options for emergency shelter.

We are writing today to share information regarding the City of Portland's efforts to respond to the ever-increasing emergency shelter needs of two distinct populations: asylum seekers and the circumstantially unhoused.

Since the fall of 2021, thousands of asylum seekers have arrived in Portland seeking shelter and services. And, since January 2023, the average weekly census of new arrivals is 80 asylum seekers, consisting of individuals and families. The majority of people seeking shelter are asylum seekers coming to Maine from our country's southern border.

As we all know, the City of Portland made a decision decades ago to operate a municipal emergency shelter. Since that time, in response to the State of Maine's General Assistance (GA) law, and consistent with the City's commitment to help people in need, our municipal commitment to providing emergency shelter has grown and expanded - in terms of both budget and beds. At this time we host and staff 654 municipal emergency shelter beds, which include:

- 208 beds for individuals at the recently opened Homeless Services Center on Riverside Street;
- 146 beds for families at the Family Shelter on Chestnut Street; and
- 300 temporary beds at the Expo (which will stay open until mid-August).
  - 70% of the beds at the Homeless Services Center are occupied by asylum seekers;
  - 100% of beds at the Family Shelter are occupied by asylum seekers; and
  - 98% of the beds at the Expo are occupied by asylum seekers.

With all of the above emergency shelter beds full, hotels in the region either at capacity and/or no longer accepting unhoused individuals due to changes in Covid protocol or because of changes to local ordinances, and very limited affordable housing stock, we are unable to meet the ever-growing demand for emergency shelter beds. As a result, more circumstantially unhoused people than ever before have resorted to sleeping outside in tents; at last count, over 130 tents had been erected at various locations throughout the city. Many of these encampments pose hazards for those in tents, the general public, and nearby local businesses.

We continue to do our best to work collaboratively, expand municipal resources, leverage much needed and appreciated State and Federal funding, and meet people's needs with humanity. However, starting on May 8, 2022, we alerted the community, including State and service organization partners, that anyone applying for GA in Portland is given information needed to conduct a self directed housing search.

In response to the issue of encampments, we have convened an Encampment Crisis Response Team (ECRT) inclusive of nonprofit service organizations, health providers, housing providers, Maine State Housing Authority (MSHA), and the Corporation for Supportive Housing, contracted by Housing and Urban Development (HUD). This convening is modeled on the structure of an Emergency Operations Center and is our attempt to organize, coordinate and execute a plan to transition those living in tents to housing (whether that is emergency shelter, transitional housing, or permanent housing) before encampments are removed due to their hazardous conditions. The ECRT met for the first time on Wednesday, May 31st. The meeting was well attended and productive. In support of this work, we have also requested assistance from Maine Emergency Management Association (MEMA) in order to ensure that this endeavor is successful.

We greatly appreciate your partnership and continued support for the emergency shelter for asylum seekers located in Saco, and we respectfully request your leadership to develop additional state level capacity to coordinate services for asylum seekers, and to develop additional emergency shelters and/or transitional housing with supportive services throughout the state to meet the needs of all Mainers. We also ask for your support of LD1644 and its fiscal note, which supports an increase in State reimbursement from 70% to 90% for all municipalities administering GA.

We know that the ECRT, and some of our above requests, will take time to yield results. And so we have been looking to other cities and states, to find alternative options and more immediate responses to the need for shelter. We understand that some states have called on the National Guard to assist with the provision of temporary shelter, as well as logistical and operational support until long term solutions can be implemented. Our hope is to avoid a need to request such action, but should we not be able to meet the goal of housing people living outdoors soon, we would like to be able to discuss that and other available options with you.

Lastly, we invite you to visit Portland this summer. We'd welcome the opportunity to give you a tour of the new Homeless Services Center, and other shelter sites as time allows.

Thank you for your time and consideration of our requests. We look forward to continuing to work with you, your staff, and the Legislature on addressing these critical issues.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Kate Snyder". The signature is written in a cursive style with a large, looped "S" at the end.

Kate Snyder, Mayor

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "Danielle P. West". The signature is written in a cursive style with a long, horizontal flourish at the end.

Danielle P. West, City Manager