



Maine Women's Lobby

THE VOICE OF MAINE WOMEN

May 6, 2021

Dear Senator Carney, Representative Harnett, and Members of the Joint Standing Committee on the Judiciary,

I join you today on behalf of the Maine Women's Lobby. For over forty years, the Maine Women's Lobby has advocated for public policy which increases the health, wellness, safety, and economic security of Maine women and girls, with a focus on the most marginalized populations and communities.

We write today **in opposition to LD 1238, "An Act To Protect Women's Single-Sex Shelters."**

Our work to expand gender equity is rooted in the idea that harmful norms around gender identity and presentation are used to marginalize, compartmentalize, and sideline members of our community – and we use that learning to create more inclusive systems and practices. Expectations about gender identity and presentation are used to control our lives and choices, to require us to be the 'right' kind of woman – not too fat, too thin, too bold, too quiet, too sexual, too frigid.

Connected to this is the regular threat or reality of violence. For women who don't comply – and even those who do – there is the shadow of sexual harassment, sexual violence, intimate partner abuse. Every woman has experienced these, or their close family and friends have. This is why shelters and crisis supports are such a critical need for so many women in Maine.

Gender-based norms and expectations work this same harm on trans women. People want to constantly debate what they should wear, how they should look, what games they can play and with whom – and in this case, whether they deserve safe, supportive shelter when they are in crisis. The gender policing is even more powerful with trans people than cis women – and so is the gender-based violence. As you will hear today, **trans women and girls experience sexual violence, harassment, and murder at higher rates than nearly any other demographic**, as well as higher rates of homelessness, poverty, unemployment, and suicide. The statistical reality of living as a trans person in our culture is all the evidence you need to know that trans women are not simply 'men in women's clothing'. Forcing trans women to use male facilities, when men are the primary perpetrators of violence against trans women, makes no one safer.

This bill seeks to exempt private shelters from complying with the Maine Human Rights Act – giving them license to discriminate against those in need. Gender equity – and feminism - is about reimagining a world where women experience equity and respect in all their identities; and where they live with safety, respect, and consent. We are no closer to equity and safety by undoing years of civil rights progress in our state.

Every person deserves safe, supportive shelter when they need it most. Right now, not everyone in Maine who needs safe housing can access it. Mainers are living without homes. Mainers in crisis are turned away from domestic violence shelters or on waiting lists. Mainers are lining up to get a bed in shelters, recovery centers, and more. And for women who don't find that bed, or



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have insecure housing, the rates of sexual violence and trauma on the streets are staggering. This conversation needs to be about making sure everyone is safely housed, and free from discrimination - not about setting standards about the 'right kind of women' to keep some people out.

We are proud to stand up today with our allies to support a vision of gender equity that opens doors, instead of closing them.

We hope you will vote 'ought not to pass' on LD 1238.

Sincerely,

Destie Hohman Sprague, Executive Director
Maine Women's Lobby / mainewomen.org