

Homeless Voices for Justice Candidate Questionnaire 2022

Governor Race

Answers from Janet T. Mills

Introduction

If you were to distinguish yourself from your opponents, what are three key differences you would highlight for voters?

My opponent served as Governor for two terms, while I am nearing the end of my first term. There are countless issues that distinguish us from each other - education, health care, climate change, reproductive freedom, the right of workers to organize and collectively bargain, and of course who we prioritize. My predecessor chose to focus on tax cuts for the wealthiest and corporations, while paying for it by cutting municipal revenue sharing which increased property taxes. In contrast, I have focused my time in office on making Maine a place where regular folks can be safe and healthy and find opportunity to live, work, and raise a family.

Housing

There are currently an estimated 1500 people seeking shelter in Maine compared to 750 seeking shelter before the COVID-19 pandemic.

Do you support the right to shelter for people experiencing homelessness?

My Administration is committed to meeting the urgent needs of people experiencing homelessness, while being fiscally responsible. While Maine, like every state in the nation, is unable to establish a legal right to shelter for every person in need, we recently proposed, and the Legislature approved, a special allocation of \$22 million to address emergency housing needs across our state. Those funds are being deployed in numerous ways: keeping over 300 individuals safely housed at two South Portland hotels, providing permanent housing for more than 200 households currently experiencing homelessness, funding additional rapid rehousing activities in communities around Maine, and providing additional critical services to hundreds more Maine people who are currently unhoused. I am also proud of the job that MaineHousing, Maine's Community Action Agencies, and other partners have done throughout the pandemic in administering hundreds of millions of rental assistance dollars throughout the state. That work has prevented thousands of people from losing their homes and provided, safe, emergency housing in hotels for hundreds more.

Do you support government funding for shelters for Maine's increasing homeless population?

Local, state and federal governments, along with the private sector, all have a key role in supporting shelters for those experiencing homelessness. My Maine Jobs & Recovery Plan has already provided \$10 million to support the important work of Maine's homeless shelters, and we have recently provided the funding necessary to allow Elena's Way, a new 24/7 wellness shelter, to open its doors this month in Portland. In my second term, we will also be taking a fresh look at the General Assistance Program and working with advocates, practitioners, municipalities and others to find new ways to make that important program even more effective in meeting the emergency housing needs of Maine people.

During the Covid-19 Pandemic, there were increased government restrictions on the use of public space, this has resulted in criminal enforcement against people experiencing homelessness. Do you support the decriminalization of people experiencing homelessness?

Homelessness is not a crime. I support diversion and provision of services for many victimless crimes, and I support tackling the root causes of homelessness to reduce the health and safety issues associated with homelessness. However, legislation that creates exceptions to criminal statutes for a person who is unhoused would likely be unworkable and might only exacerbate situations if police cannot step in to prevent escalation and maintain public order. I support the Homelessness Protocol that encourages law enforcement to connect the unhoused to crisis services, mental health and substance use disorder professionals, employment services, emergency and transitional housing and case management services as an alternative to citation or arrest.

Do you support allocating government funds to build more affordable homes and subsidize housing for the low-income community?

Stable, affordable housing is critical to ensuring strong neighborhoods, schools, and communities. But more than that, a home is where we raise our kids, gather around the table to celebrate, and, for so many Maine people, a place where we age with dignity. For these reasons and more, I am committed to ensuring that every person in Maine has a home to call their own.

That's why, shortly after taking office, I released the senior housing bond that had sat on my predecessor's desk for years. That's also why I signed into law the Maine Affordable Housing Tax Credit - the single largest investment in housing in Maine's history - and why I dedicated \$50 million through my Jobs Plan to expand affordable housing in Maine. I also signed a bill that allows accessory dwelling units in all zoning districts, provides support for communities to increase affordable housing, and reduces regulatory barriers to multi-family housing development.

All of this in just 3 ½ years was more action to tackle the housing crisis than was taken during the previous 8, but it's also just the beginning. We have so much more to do on housing, and I'm eager to continue that work.

Do you support providing legal protections for people experiencing homelessness who are subject of discrimination in housing, unemployment, and benefits?

I support the pilot project being undertaken by the Maine Human Rights Commission to receive and review complaints that a person was denied housing, employment, or access to a public accommodation based on their real or perceived lack of housing. However, I believe the Maine Human Rights Act is best used to protect people who are being discriminated against for an immutable trait, such as their real or perceived race, color, ancestry, national origin, sex, sexual orientation, gender identity, physical or mental disability, religion, or age.

Food Security

Do you support enacting work requirements for human needs or federal assistance programs, such as Medicaid, Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), or Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF)?

There are already work requirements for some of these programs. For example, SNAP generally requires that 16-59 year-olds be working or looking for a job unless certain exceptions apply, such as if a person is taking care of an incapacitated person or a child under age 6, or is in a training or education program. For TANF, most people must be engaged in work training or education programs to be eligible. Maine does not currently have work requirements for Medicaid. I do not support changing the eligibility requirements to create any additional barriers to people getting the help they need with food, health care or other basic needs. In fact, when I first took office in 2019, I informed the Trump administration that I would not accept the terms of a waiver imposing work requirements in order to access health care through the Medicaid program.

I do believe in policies that combat poverty and give people economic opportunities in order to transition off of these programs. I was proud to support and sign into law two pieces of bipartisan legislation – the LIFT bill which addresses the so-called MaineCare "benefits cliff" and gives more families access to Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) benefits by eliminating the gross income test, and the STEP bill which reduces the benefits cliff for TANF recipients, addresses the SNAP benefits cliff, provides funding for whole-family economic security initiatives to apply for grants from the Department of Health and Human Services, and enables TANF recipients to count time spent pursuing their GED toward their work requirements.

What is your top priority regarding food security in the State of Maine, and how do you intend to address this issue in our community?

My top priority regarding food security is implementing Maine's roadmap to ending hunger by 2030, as well as ensuring that Maine children maintain access to nutritious school meals.

Maine's rate of food insecurity has been as high as 16.4% in recent years, and is higher than the national average. It is a particularly troubling issue with respect to our children, with about 20% of Maine kids being food insecure – the highest in all of New England. I supported the legislative initiative to end hunger in Maine by 2030, and charged my Department of Agriculture, Conservation & Forestry with developing a plan to get us there. Along with others in the State, they did just that and produced "Everyone at the table: Maine's Roadmap to End Hunger by 2030," which examines the root causes of hunger and designs strategies to achieve the goal of consistent, nutritious food for Maine people.

I am also proud to have supported providing school meals to all Maine students for free, regardless of their family's income - the second state in the nation to do so. This law reduces stigma, fights hunger, and enhances learning among Maine students.

Do you support using government funding for food security resources?

I have supported funding for a variety of initiatives related to food security resources such as Free School Meals – the federal government covered costs of providing free school meals during the pandemic; federal funding ended this fall, but the State of Maine has made these free meals permanent – allowing ongoing nutritional supports for Maine students. I have also supported funding for increased home-delivered meals for older Mainers through Meals on Wheels and for Maine's WIC program to be among the first in the nation to support program participants in using a phone app to purchase nutritious produce from farmers markets.

Opioid Crisis

The Homeless Opioid User Service Engagement (H.O.U.S.E.), an established service engagement program to provide 50 opioid users in the State rapid access to low-barrier treatment for substance use disorder and stable housing to support their recovery, was funded by the State of Maine and appropriations are scheduled to cease this coming December. Do you support renewing these appropriations for the fiscal year 2022-2023?

I have supported this important pilot since it was introduced and championed by Drew Gattine during the 129th Legislature. The two selected projects faced delays in getting started and need additional time. My administration is taking steps to utilize existing state and federal funds to continue the two projects through the end of fiscal year 2022-23.

In 2021, there were 621 overdoses in the state of Maine, an increase of 26.7% from the previous year, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. Part of that is due to the lack of access to detox beds in hospitals and EMS. Do you support increasing the number of detox beds in these facilities?

Many of these detox beds were lost during the pandemic, and adding beds in communities is a priority in our recently updated Opioid Response Strategic Action Plan. Earlier this fall, DHHS conditionally approved six projects across the state to receive over \$3 million in state funds to add detox and residential treatment beds. While we encourage every hospital to provide appropriate treatment to all patients diagnosed with a substance use disorder, freestanding detox facilities such as Milestone in Portland and New Horizons in Hampden are more suitable for patients who need medically supervised withdrawal. Expanding beds at Milestone is one of the projects conditionally approved for state funding.

Do you support the decriminalization of the personal possession of drugs?

I support efforts to reduce the stigma for those suffering from substance use disorder, and to reduce barriers to treatment and recovery. However, I am opposed to decriminalizing efforts that may put more poison into the hands of Mainers, including children, and that could lead to more fatal overdoses.