

130th Legislature, 2st Session
Testimony of Erik C. Jorgensen
To the Joint Standing Committee on Labor and Housing
In support of LD 1891:

An Act To Continue Supporting Safe Drinking Water for Maine Families

February 2, 2022

Senator Daughtry, Representative Sylvester, esteemed members of the Labor and Housing Committee, my name is Erik Jorgensen, and I am the Senior Director of Government Relations and Communications at the Maine State Housing Authority (MaineHousing).

The Maine State Housing Authority is Maine's housing finance agency, created by the Legislature in 1969 to address the problems of unsafe, unsuitable, overcrowded, and unaffordable housing. We are authorized to issue bonds to finance single-family and multi-family housing for Maine's low and moderate income citizens. We are structured as an independent agency to utilize effective private methods of finance for public purposes, to be independent, and to be responsive.

We are authorized to act as an agent for the state in administering several federal programs including federal rental subsidies, emergency rent relief, federal weatherization and fuel assistance programs, the federal low-income housing tax credit program, and homeless grant programs. We receive state general fund revenue for homeless shelter programs and receive a dedicated portion of the real estate transfer tax for the Housing Opportunities for Maine Fund to support our programs.

We support LD 1891. It's a very short and simple bill –just one paragraph- with a disproportionately long potential impact. It provides continued support for MaineHousing's well water remediation program, which has, in the years since it passed in the 127th legislature, chugged along quietly, having served more than 660 households in all parts of the state. It's a program that disproportionately benefits residents of rural areas, where households rely on wells. And it's important to point out that wells in even the most pristine places can be subject to contamination, as arsenic is a naturally-occurring element found throughout New England's geology.

If you are part of a public water supply, issues like bacterial contamination, arsenic, radon and other nasty things that can come out of the tap are largely not to be worried about. But if you

own your own well, the issues are different, and remediation, which generally involves the installation of filters can be out of financial reach.

Up until now, this program has focused on arsenic remediation. Were this measure to pass, the program would be extended. Its scope would also potentially expand to include remediation for other types of well contaminants. The program provides grants to eligible single-family homeowners or landlords with private well water that shows evidence of high levels of contamination.

The program is narrowly focused. It is and would continue to be available to households at or below 120% of area median income, and whose liquid assets are limited – in short it's designed to reach those residents who are least likely to be able to afford this type of remediation on their own.

While it is hard to know precisely how many non-arsenic cases would come before us, and whether there would be a significantly different sort of protocol to remediate a different type of contaminant, we do know that for arsenic, the costs to filter the water in an average household in this program are just short of \$3,800 per project. There are different types of filtration and each household is different, so it's hard to predict with certainty how long these funds would last or how many households could be reached. But I do think that our track record in the arsenic program provides a general guide, and there is no doubt about the public health benefits of reducing hazards in well water.

Bad well water begets bad outcomes. Arsenic can cause cancer and low birth weight infants; lead, as we all know can cause long term intellectual damage. Other contaminants just make people sick in other ways. And while so many health issues today seem insurmountable, well water problems can often be solved in a straightforward and cost-effective way.

My grandmother, in Buckfield, used to hand me a glass of water from her well and say without fail “now, taste that good Maine water.” And she was right – the water in our state is delicious – some of the best anywhere. With this bill we move a step closer to assuring that our water is in fact as safe as it is refreshing.

MaineHousing looks forward to continuing this important service for our state, and we thank Representative Fay for bringing this bill forward.

