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April 14, 2023

Re: LD 462, An Act to Assist Persons Experiencing Homelessness in Areas of High Rent by Seeking a Waiver from the Federal Government

Senator Pierce, Representative Gere, and members of the Joint Select Committee on Housing, my name is Cullen Ryan, and I am the Executive Director of Community Housing of Maine or CHOM. CHOM houses Maine's most vulnerable people and advocates on their behalf. I also chair the Maine Homeless Policy Committee, the Maine Continuum of Care Board of Directors, as well as the ESAC Long Term Stayers Committee.

I am testifying in strong support of LD 462, An Act to Assist Persons Experiencing Homelessness in Areas of High Rent by Seeking a Waiver from the Federal Government. This bill provides that, for an area where the actual fair market rent for existing housing is greater than the fair market rent calculated by HUD, MaineHousing is required to seek a temporary waiver of the requirements of the Section 8 housing program administered by HUD or any other federal housing assistance program to permit additional funds to cover the cost of the actual fair market rent for a person who is homeless.

As you know, there is an overall shortage of affordable housing for all populations in Maine: Waitlists for affordable housing exceed 30,000 households and more than 25,000 Maine households are on waiting lists for federal rental assistance, often waiting five to ten years. And people who have recently received federal rental assistance are having an increasingly difficult time finding available rental units at all, let alone ones that have rents that a rental voucher can accommodate.

The ESAC Long Term Stayers Committee, which includes 20 participating organizations, has housed 427 of the longest stayers in homelessness with the most complex needs in Maine over the last eight years, and also demonstrated that this population is as many as 57 times more likely to be in jail and 29 times more likely to be in the hospital when unhoused vs housed. Housing this population saves us a lot of money and is a game changer for each person. Our biggest problem is finding it.

The vast majority of LTS housed through the ESAC LTS Initiative has been through scattered-site housing first approach. This model feathers homeless populations into housing using rental subsidies. Outreach services are provided to ensure people maintain stability in their housing. This model has had a success rate between 90-95% since the initiative began. However, this model is dependent upon finding and securing market housing with rents that work with rental subsidy maximums. With extremely low vacancy rates and soaring rents, this has become exceedingly difficult.

Rental assistance levels the playing field for people who can't afford housing. Housing vouchers make housing affordable for people with low incomes in Maine, especially so for people with extremely low incomes - the population of people experiencing homelessness. Requesting a temporary waiver from the federal government for Section 8 and other federal housing vouchers, for areas in the state where the actual fair market rent for existing housing is greater than the fair market rent calculated by HUD to permit additional funds to cover the cost of the actual fair market rent for a person who is homeless will greatly assist this population in attaining truly affordable, stable housing in the community.

Please support LD 462 so that we can all work together to end and prevent homelessness in Maine.

Thank you for the opportunity to comment.