



Testimony of

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Before

The Committee on Health and Human Services

IN SUPPORT OF

**LD 1282 An Act to Streamline Income Verification Requests for Income
Supplementation and Assistance Programs**

Senator Baldacci, Representative Meyer, and members of the Joint Standing Committee on Health and Human Services, I am Erik Jorgensen, Senior Director of Government Relations and Communications at the Maine State Housing Authority (MaineHousing) and I am submitting this testimony in strong support of **LD 1282** An Act to Streamline Income Verification Requests for Income Supplementation and Assistance Programs.

MaineHousing has been helping Maine people own, rent, repair, and heat their homes since 1969. We are an independent state authority (not a state agency) created to address the problems of unsafe, unsuitable, overcrowded, and unaffordable housing. We are authorized to issue bonds to finance single family mortgages for first time homebuyers and for affordable multi-family housing.

We are also authorized to administer a number of state and federal programs, including rental subsidies, weatherization, fuel assistance, two housing block grants,

the low-income housing tax credit program, and homeless grant programs. We receive state general fund revenue for homeless programs and receive a dedicated portion of the real estate transfer tax for the Housing Opportunities for Maine (HOME) Fund.

We are very grateful that Senator Daughtry submitted this important bill, and I wish to extend my apologies for not being there in person today. MaineHousing operates several means-tested programs in Maine, including our administration of various housing assistance voucher programs. Maine has approximately 12,000 housing choice vouchers, which are HUD's primary form of housing assistance. The purpose of this program, as this committee knows, is to aid very low income families, the disabled and the elderly in finding affordable basic housing. At least 75% of all vouchers issued by a housing authority must be targeted to households whose total income does not exceed 30% of the area median income. There are around 12,000 federal housing choice vouchers in Maine, and MaineHousing has jurisdiction over those vouchers that do not fall into communities covered by public housing authorities. We administer about 1/3 of them.

This bill focuses on the challenge of income verification. For our Housing Choice Voucher program and those operated by our fellow public housing authorities around Maine, we know that accurately understanding an applicant's income is obviously the most important part of determining whether an applicant can receive a voucher. This is a process that requires batches of verification forms to be bundled together and sent to DHHS. Our understanding is that once at DHHS, the verification forms then need to travel between departments depending on how many benefit programs an applicant is enrolled in, before they are completed and returned to us.

The income verification process can take 4-6 weeks to complete, which is a very long wait at the end of what is almost always a years-long period on a waiting list and an uncertain period of searching to find an appropriate unit. This wait can spell the difference between leasing up and losing a unit.

We understand that there is a sponsor amendment being proposed that could expand this process beyond housing choice voucher programs, to other income-restricted programming, such as the Home Energy Assistance Program (HEAP). We do not have a great deal of information on the specific mechanics of what is being proposed in this bill, but can say that any efforts to streamline the income verification process would be welcome from our perspective.

If there were to be limited, secure, narrowly focused read-only electronic access for MaineHousing, public housing authorities and similar entities, it could make a tremendous difference.

I look forward to attending the work session, answering questions, and learning more.

Thank you