



Creating and supporting quality housing opportunities for those in need in Maine

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Dear Senator Baldacci, Representative Meyer, and esteemed members of the Health and Human Services Committee:

Please accept this testimony in support of LD 1426, ***An Act to Secure Housing for the Most Vulnerable Maine Residents by Amending the Laws Governing Municipal General Assistance.***

Since 2018, QHC has provided over 550 households, over 1265 adults and children with permanent housing with mostly private sector property owners. Our residents are older adults, families with school-age children, and individuals. All of our residents are low income earners, all have experienced homelessness and/or housing insecurity, and all have insurmountable barriers to accessing and maintaining housing without our support. Despite these challenges, once housed, 99% of our residents successfully complete year-long tenancies.

We navigate our residents through every essential needs system to ensure that they stay stably housed and on their way to self sufficiency, which is the goal of every single Project HOME resident. The program we work most closely with is General Assistance, which is why we are thrilled to see so many pieces of legislation attempting to make this policy work better for the people it serves, for the people who administer it, and to make it more efficient and less costly for the taxpayer.

Maine's General Assistance program is a lifeline for Maine people struggling to make ends meet in every County. With 89,000 Maine households unable to afford their rent today, out of approximately 163,000 total renter households, this lifeline is critical to the health and safety of those who receive these services.

The past few years taught us more clearly than ever before that housing equals health. Without stable and affordable housing, no one can access the benefits of education, good health, job training/employment, and a stress free retirement. Simply put, a safe home must come first before anyone can succeed. Maine no longer takes that for granted.

From our perspective, the most important aspects of LD 1426 and the other bills are:

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- 1) Requiring the State to cover 90% of the General Assistance cost so that municipalities are not left with the cost burden of homelessness and poverty. Maine municipalities, practitioners, and community members have been working with this policy for over a decade since it was changed, and all agree that the State should return to the 90% coverage.
- 2) Aligning the General Assistance rental payment standards with Section 8/Housing Choice Voucher standards. Currently, DHHS administers 3 rental assistance programs: Shelter Plus Care, BRAP, and General Assistance. The Housing Authorities, of which MaineHousing is one, receive Section 8 funding directly from the Federal Housing and Urban Development Department (HUD). Of the 163,000 renter households in Maine, 89,000 who cannot afford their rent, there are only 12,000 Housing Choice Vouchers in the State. HUD sets the fair market rents for Section 8 throughout each housing authority jurisdiction. DHHS applies these fair market rents to its Shelter Plus Care and BRAP program, but not to its General Assistance program. Instead, General Assistance rental payment standards are set by the Maine Municipal Association and then adopted by each municipality each year. Across the State, the General Assistance rental payment standards are set \$100-\$300 lower than the HUD fair market rents. As you can imagine, this disparity causes General Assistance to be less desirable, or not accepted at all, by landlords.
- 3) Aligning the General Assistance reauthorization process with every other rental assistance program in Maine, which are every year. Currently, those receiving General Assistance have to return to General Assistance each month in order to prove they are still income eligible. The eligibility process is costly to administer as it takes much time and often results in landlords receiving late rental payments. In addition, our Project HOME residents report that this is a demeaning process that requires them to perform their poverty on a monthly basis. We strongly believe that General Assistance should operate its reauthorization process like every other rental assistance program in Maine.

Some may be worried that these changes will cost more money. We do not believe so. What we believe is that aligning the rental payment standard and reauthorization process for all of Maine's rental assistance programs will reduce the administrative burden on

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staff, on nonprofits like ours who spend between 10-40 hours per applicant to navigate this difficult and time-consuming process, and on recipients of services who must devote hours and hours to gathering documents and waiting on lines instead of actively working towards their goals of self sufficiency.

Some may be worried that this will keep people from pursuing their professional and career dreams in order to stay on General Assistance. We do not believe so. What we believe, and what we see every day, is that 100% of our residents want to move into self sufficiency and away from government programs as fast as they can. However, when they first access General Assistance they are in the worst crisis they have ever been in and need early and sufficient support.

Providing early and sufficient support is the best strategy for reducing the time they are reliant on programs like General Assistance. In addition, if landlords can rely on General Assistance to pay fair market rents like the other rental assistance programs in Maine, they will accept it. As a result, more housing will be immediately available to rent for those receiving General Assistance. More landlords accepting General Assistance will reduce the number of expensive hotel rooms the State and municipalities are paying for those experiencing a housing crisis who cannot find a landlord willing to accept General Assistance. And, once people have a home, they are able to stabilize and make plans for achieving their professional and family goals.

Intuitively, we all know that when people are unhoused and in crisis, they are unable to think about future aspirations because they are in day to day survival mode. From the public health perspective, having future aspirations is a protective factor that prevents people from making unhealthy choices and keeps them on track to achieve their dreams. We see this in our work day in and day out.

The changes before you today are exactly what we all want, and they are based on the recommendations of those of us who have worked with this policy for decades. What we all want is a policy that invests appropriately in adults and children in deep crisis early on, stabilizes their homes, and encourages them to actualize their future aspirations.

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Thank you for the opportunity to provide this testimony.

Victoria Morales
Executive Director
Quality Housing Coalition
victoria@qualityhousingcoalition.org
(207)-216-0643

Rod Mahoua
Director of Programs
Quality Housing Coalition
rod@qualityhousingcoalition.org
(207) 841-1273