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January 30, 2024

Re: LD 2158, An Act to Improve the Housing Voucher System

Senator Pierce, Representative Gere, and members of the Joint Select Committee on Housing, my name is Vickey Merrill, and I am the Advocacy Director for Community Housing of Maine (CHOM). CHOM houses Maine's most vulnerable people and advocates on their behalf. I am a Tri-Chair for the Maine Continuum of Care, Co-Chair of the Maine Homeless Policy Committee, and serve on the Maine Continuum of Care Board of Directors.

I am testifying in strong support of LD 2158, An Act to Improve the Housing Voucher System.

LD 2158 does the following regarding housing vouchers.

1. *It requires MaineHousing to collect data regarding and to submit applications to HUD for waivers that:*
 - a. *Allow MaineHousing to enter into contracts at a higher rate than the fair market rental rate as established by HUD. The waiver may not result in fewer housing vouchers being issued than before the waiver was obtained;*
 - b. *Allow MaineHousing or a municipal housing authority to establish reasonable time limits for the use of housing vouchers issued by the MaineHousing or the municipal housing authority; and*
 - c. *Allow MaineHousing or a municipal housing authority to issue housing vouchers that may be used upon issuance anywhere within the State.*
2. *Contingent upon approval of a waiver, it codifies under the powers and duties of MaineHousing the power authorized by each waiver.*
3. *It requires MaineHousing to submit:*
 - a. *Suggested legislation that requires all housing authorities or public corporations created or authorized pursuant to the Maine Revised Statutes, Title 30-A, chapter 201 to conform their housing voucher programs to the housing voucher program administered by MaineHousing; and*
 - b. *Report detailing its efforts to obtain the 3 waivers from HUD. The joint standing committee of the Legislature having jurisdiction over housing matters is authorized to report out to the 132nd Legislature in 2025 legislation related to the report and suggested legislation submitted by MaineHousing.*

Maine has a shortage of Section 8 and other forms of rental assistance. There are some 12,000 vouchers and our waiting lists have been as high as 26,000 people, with some waiting for up to 10 years.

Since the onset of the pandemic, rents in Maine have grown significantly, broadening the affordability gap. This has been compounded by another problem: when people do finally receive a Section 8 rental subsidy, they have been unable to locate housing within the rental limits. This bill would help solve that and streamline the path for people to exit homelessness and ultimately poverty.

There is a direct correlation between homelessness and a lack of rental subsidies and affordable housing. Most families are circumstantially homeless; they fall behind on rent because of housing affordability issues. Rental assistance solves that very effectively. But the rental amount it provides must correspond to the rental market.

LD 2158 would pave the way for rental subsidies to better match the current housing market and help to move many people out of homelessness and into stability. No one does better in homelessness. Everyone does better with housing.

As this Committee knows, communities throughout Maine are experiencing an exponential increase in unsheltered homelessness and encampments. As recently as December, Hubs were



reporting more than 900 people sleeping outside throughout Maine – and that is after months of effort to bring people indoors.

Encampments are not good for any city or town. Access to housing is.

This bill could assist Maine in addressing this current crisis as there is not enough rental assistance or affordable housing for those who need it. This legislation would be a huge step in bridging that gap.

Let's work to create sound solutions, rooted in best practices, to end and prevent homelessness in Maine.

Thank you for the opportunity to comment.