

Housing Justice Maine Organizational Testimony

Greetings Senator Rotundo, Representative Sachs and members of the Appropriations and Financial Affairs Committee and good afternoon to members of the Housing Committee. Thank you for your time. My name is Nyawal Lia, I am the housing organizer for Housing Justice Maine, a statewide coalition working to enhance the voices of Maine people who are being affected by housing in Maine.

I am here to speak in support of LD2214 and the critical funding proposed to “*supplement or establish programs addressing the needs of people experiencing homelessness or facing other immediate housing needs*” Emergency shelter and wrap-around support for people experiencing homelessness are a critical need. Please include this in your budget.

HJM is also here to ask that, in your deliberations regarding LD2214, that you work to address an unmet need in our housing system: that unmet need is rent relief. We are here in the hopes that through this budget process, this committee will create a rental assistance program that would benefit the most at risk Mainers facing homelessness and eviction.

During this legislative session, the Housing Committee considered rent relief and included funding LD 1540 as a top priority for this budget. We support LD 1540, which creates a rental assistance pilot program, as an idea to build on. We believe that if we are able to target relief to the lowest income renters in this program, it could make the difference between thousands losing housing and thousands of Mainers being able to find housing stability.

Housing Justice Maine is a coalition of organizations who believe housing is a human right, and we seek to empower those residents most deeply impacted by an oppressive housing system. HJM was formed by Maine organizers shortly after the start of the pandemic in 2020, when the shelter-in-place order left many people without stable housing in an especially vulnerable place.

- We know that when we invest in rental assistance, there are fewer evictions, which is best for renters and their families, best for landlords, and best for our communities. For example, when the Emergency Rental Assistance program was in place, we saw a reduction in evictions even during an unstable economic period. Maine has learned lessons from that program and can use them to support renters again.
- Dignity First in Bangor- Is an organization that is founded on a solidarity, not charity, model. The deep sense of belonging and feeling valued is what all of us long for. Dignity First is an organization who knows those who are affected by homelessness are not exempt from this need. Their voices are critical in meeting their needs and ultimately their goals in life. As an organization, they strive to honor and uphold the dignity of unhoused neighbors. Their goal is to cultivate a village which provides the best chance for people to stay housed and begin to feel a sense of belonging again.

- The Immigrant Housing Coalition formed by the Late Lado Ladoka, is an organization that worked to incorporate the voices of immigrant experiences in Maine when it comes to housing.
- Maine Equal Justice - Under a mile from the State House, states” there are unhoused folks living in the woods, under the bridge, in very dangerous circumstances. Shelters are full. As Dr. Katie Spencer White of the Mid Maine Homeless Shelter said, what we need is housing vouchers. We must respond to meet the housing crisis now.
- Raise-Op in Lewiston, recently developed 18 new units of affordable housing, and had to decline over 100 applicants for the new housing because their income was too low, and they didn’t have rental assistance to make up the difference.
- MPA works to support Maine people through lobbying and hosting community meetings with legislators and lawmakers to keep the vital conversations around issues that matter to Maine people. One of MPA’s top issues has been housing. Just last week members of MPA and myself had a meeting with the governor’s office to urge them to put more funding into housing as we delivered a housing petition that has been signed by over 1,500 Mainers state wide “ naming that no one should have to be unhoused this winter”
- Homeless Voices for Justice - HVJ’s social change activities range from representation in planning bodies, policy advocacy, voter registration, community education, and direct action.

Rental assistance is not just a central Maine, or southern Maine issue, it is an issue that affects all Maine residents. Housing Justice Maine thrives to be in collaboration with organizations who care to uplift the idea that housing is a human right and with the right strategies in place we as a state and as organizations can work towards this holistic idea of a safe state where people can stay housed with the right support.

Once more, thank you all for your time and dedication.

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