

Testimony in support of LD 1710
Belinda Vemba
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Good afternoon Senator Rotundo, Representative Sachs, members of the AFA and Housing Committees.

My name is Belinda Vemba, I am a resident of Westbrook and I am here today to testify in favor of the housing supports included in this budget and to ask you to add additional resources to address the need for rent relief in our state right now. You may wonder why I am so passionate about this issue. It is because having a place to call home gives a sense of identity and belonging. Including rent relief in the budget would mean that families like mine and thousands of others who spend unbearable months in homeless shelters, hotels, and outdoor encampments can get affordable housing. This will ease the heavy load that General assistance is currently shouldering.

Funding rent relief would mean that we could finally address the long wait lists for housing and take pressure off the GA program. It would address the housing needs of people with disabilities, students, low wage workers and single-parent families who deserve a safe and affordable home.

A state rent relief program would help Maine families pay their rent by covering a portion based on their income. Maine families are currently playing a chess game when they have to decide what needs are more important. Including rent relief in the budget will mean that families can have peace of mind because they won't have to choose between housing and other necessities like food, medicine or heat. This dream can only be reached by helping people pay the difference as we work to build more housing and lower the price of rent.

According to Pine Tree Legal, between 2017 to 2019 a total 12% of the families they represented were non-white, while only 5% of Maine's population is non-white. In the same time frame, people with disabilities made up 28% of Maine's extremely low-income renter households. People who are already facing inequities are the ones also feeling the brunt of this housing crisis. We can do better! I stand here today for all Mainers asking that you consider funding rent relief in the budget.

It is not an exaggeration to say that we are on the brink of a homelessness epidemic. If we don't act now, it will be too late and generations after us will suffer and will never know the true meaning of how it is to truly have a home. So please, let's stand together and make sure every person in Maine has a place to call home.