



TESTIMONY OF MICHAEL KEBEDE, ESQ.

LD 521 – Ought To Pass

**An Act to Prohibit Discrimination in Housing Based on Source of
Income, Veteran Status or Military Status**

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PO Box 7860
Portland, ME 04112

(207) 774-5444
ACLUMaine.org
@ACLUMaine

Senator Carney, Representative Kuhn and distinguished members of the Joint Standing Committee on Judiciary, greetings. My name is Michael Kebede, and I am Policy Director for the American Civil Liberties Union of Maine, a statewide organization committed to advancing and preserving civil liberties guaranteed by the Maine and U.S. Constitutions. On behalf of our members, I urge you to support LD 521, legislation that would expand the civil rights of renters in Maine.

The Housing Choice Voucher program is the nation's largest rental housing program. It is a program that requires a public-private partnership by providing vouchers for people living in poverty to supplement their rent payments to private landlords. Yet all too often this endeavor by the federal government is a public program without private partners, because there is no prohibition in many states against landlords rejecting renters solely because they use a voucher to pay for their housing. Even though vouchers provide payment guaranteed by the federal government, many landlords refuse to rent to people because of biases against people living in poverty.

Consistent with its motto, *Dirigo*, Maine was an early adopter of legislation prohibiting housing discrimination of this sort. In 1975, the Maine's Human Rights Act was amended to prohibit discrimination against renters who receive federal, state or local public assistance. 5 M.R.S.A. § 4581-A. Unfortunately, in *Dussault v. RRE Coach Lantern Holdings*, 2014 ME 8, the Law Court interpreted this section so as to virtually make it meaningless. Because of the Law Court's decision, landlords in Maine may discriminate against renters because the renters hold vouchers. All too often, this leads people who have the means to rent an apartment with a voucher without a place to rent.

Similarly, landlords have turned away veterans simply because they use Veterans Affairs Supportive Housing (VASH) program vouchers to assist with paying rent. Given that veterans are at increased risk of homelessness, it is especially important to remove barriers to housing for current or ex servicemembers.



We urge you to vote *ought to pass*.