

LD 1282, An Act to Streamline Income Verification Requests for Income Supplementation and Assistance Programs

Chair Baldacci, Chair Meyer and members of the Health & Human Services committee my name is John Hodge and I am the Executive Director of the Brunswick and Topsham Housing Authorities and I also represent the Maine Association of Public Housing Directors, MAPHD. I rise to support this legislation to ensure timely responses to housing authorities requests for income verification on behalf of participants of our housing subsidy programs.

State and federal housing programs that provide critical housing subsidies for families throughout the State require we verify a household income to determine their eligibility for the assistance and the amount of assistance that household is eligible to receive. Many of our programs function on the basis that eligible households will pay 30% of their adjusted gross household income towards the rent while programs such as the Housing Choice Voucher will pay the difference. It is also required that we verify the household's income through a third party.

For some of our program participants, the primary source of income is the Temporary Assistance to Needy Families, TANF or Child Support payments. As such, we obtain their Authorization for Release of Information and provide it to the third party income source which in this case is the Department of Health & Human Services. Our staff submits the release of information form and an income verification request to DHHS through a Housing Requests email. This request requires staff time to submit the request, review the request, answer the request, release the information to the requesting party and any follow ups necessary to ensure timeliness and accuracy. In other words, it is time consuming for all parties involved.

The response time from DHHS will vary from one week to three months. Housing authorities rely on this information for two purposes. The first is to lease up a new resident in a program so they can receive their housing assistance. Any delay is detrimental to a family which may have been waiting years for housing assistance. The other is our requirement to annually verify a program participants income. While this does not directly impact their housing, it is their responsibility to submit their income information to us and assist us in obtaining the third party verification.

Failure to provide annual income to a housing authority can be grounds for termination of their assistance. While no housing authority would terminate housing assistance to anyone who is actively working with us to determine

annual income, it is imperative to state how important this information is so we can accurately determine what the assistance will be for the coming year. This is important to the family as it is important to the taxpayer to assure that the program funds are being used in accordance with program rules and regulations.

Today we are seeking a better way to secure this information on behalf of the people that rely on our programs and the people who work on behalf of those who need our assistance. In today's technologically advanced society, we believe there is a better way. Authorizing staff at housing authorities to directly access this information electronically will greatly enhance our abilities to serve those who need housing assistance and eliminate the endless requests for information our staff send to DHHS. This is not a unique request as housing authorities currently have electronic access to State of Maine DMV and criminal history records.

We understand there may be some issues regarding electronic access but we stand ready to assist the department to make this happen. We believe it to be in the best interest of the residents we serve and the good people who work at DHHS. We also acknowledge there may be some concerns granting electronic access but please be assured, housing authorities have been dealing with issues of using and keeping safe personal information since the inception of housing assistance programs. Housing authorities currently have access to income information at the federal level through the Enterprise Income Verification system, EIV. We have strict rules on how we use and maintain personal information and we receive annual training to maintain our certifications to use EIV.

On behalf of MAPHD, I thank you for your time and would be happy to answer any questions you may have.

Thank You.

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