



Creating and supporting quality housing opportunities for those in need in Maine

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Dear Senator Pierce, Representative Gere, and esteemed members of the Joint Select Committee on Housing:

Please accept this testimony in support of LD 1609.

Since 2018, QHC has provided over 550 households, over 1265 adults and children with permanent housing with mostly private sector property owners. Our residents are older adults, families with school-age children, and individuals. All of our residents are low income earners, all have experienced homelessness and/or housing insecurity, and all have insurmountable barriers to accessing and maintaining housing without our support. Despite these challenges, once housed, 99% of our residents successfully complete year-long tenancies.

We have learned a great deal about the needs of Maine renters, primarily the 90% of Maine renters not lucky enough to have housing supported by a Section 8 voucher or subsidized housing. We have also learned a great deal about Maine property owners and what they need in order to remove barriers to house lower income renters. That is why we are here today - to share this perspective which we believe is unique at the State House, and to ask you to think about the 90% of renters, 55% of whom are paying more than 30% of their incomes on their housing making it unaffordable. These are Maine's employees, older adults, and so so many children attending our schools.

QHC has spent the last 6 years learning about all of the systems of support, including the barriers to access and maintain support, and we navigate our Project HOME residents through them to make sure they have the support they need to stay stably housed. These systems are TANF, SNAP, MaineCare, GA, BRAP, Shelter Plus Care, Housing Choice Vouchers, Project Based Vouchers, LIHTC, and LIHEAP. Unfortunately, the majority of Maine renters have no support at all because the wages they earn place them just above the poverty limit, and they are not the lucky ones to have in hand a Housing Choice Voucher, of which there are only 12,000 in the entire State. Out of 163,000 renters, 89,000 of whom are unable to afford a median priced 2 bedroom apartment today, 12,000 federal vouchers is a very small amount.

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Remote learning provided a window/computer screen into every Maine student's home during the pandemic. As a result, schools became more aware of the dire housing situations facing so many students, and they began to name housing insecurity as the most significant obstacle facing their students' ability to learn at school.

It was around this time that a few school social workers reached out to QHC to help with housing insecure families at their schools. These calls were the catalyst for our 8:00 am Tuesday morning zoom meetings with social workers and McKinney Vento Liaisons from many different counties in 2020 and 2021. Representative Cloutier and Senator Moore often joined us for those calls. We learned that most schools did not have a separate paid McKinney Vento liaison position but rather had an administrator or social worker do the job in addition to their own, and that the responsibility of the MV liaison was to arrange for transportation for students that became displaced or were experiencing homelessness. We had many discussions on these Tuesday morning calls about whether and how schools could help actually prevent the loss of homes, and what services existed in each community.

When the federal government provided ARPA funding for schools, some Maine schools created a fund to pay for back rent and utilities to prevent students from losing their homes. These funds worked - not to pay everything owed, but to pay some and importantly, to buy time for programs like ours to work with each family on their financial plan and to piece together other resources to help that family get back on their feet.

Today, you will hear from Chris Indorf, the Assistant Superintendent of Biddeford, Dayton and Saco School Department, among others, talk about how they invested ARPA funds in securing the homes of their children because having a safe and secure home is the foundation necessary for each child to show up to school each day ready to learn. Since we know these programs worked, and we absolutely know we will be in this renter housing crisis for at least the next 3-7 years, we believe that investing in schools who are often first to know about the risks of homelessness for their students is one of the most efficient and effective ways to prevent student homelessness.

Thank you for the opportunity to provide this testimony.

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