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May 5, 2023

Re LD 1426, An Act to Secure Housing for the Most Vulnerable Maine Residents by Amending the Laws Governing Municipal General Assistance

Senator Baldacci, Representative Meyer, and members of the Health and Human Services Committee, my name is Cullen Ryan, and I am the Executive Director of Community Housing of Maine (CHOM). CHOM houses Maine's most vulnerable people and advocates on behalf of these broader populations. I am a member of the Statewide Homeless Council and also chair the Maine Homeless Policy Committee and the Maine Continuum of Care Board of Directors.

My testimony is in support of LD 1426, An Act to Secure Housing for the Most Vulnerable Maine Residents by Amending the Laws Governing Municipal General Assistance. This bill would make a number of changes to the General Assistance (GA) program specifically regarding GA rental assistance LD 1426

- 1 *Requires an overseer, no later than the 120th day following appointment or election, to complete training on the requirements of the municipal GA program,*
- 2 *Replaces, for determining the maximum level of assistance, the fair market value determination with setting the assistance at the equivalent amount of rental assistance provided for tenant-based housing choice vouchers under Section 8 of the United States Housing Act of 1937 except that the benefit level may not be less than the difference between the applicant's income and 110% of the area's fair market rent,*
- 3 *Provides that if GA is being used to pay rent for an applicant whose rent is subject to a lease an overseer may redetermine the applicant's eligibility annually,*
- 4 *Increases from 70% to 90% the amount of state reimbursement for the costs of GA incurred by a municipality and each Indian tribe,*
- 5 *Directs the Department of Health and Human Services (DHHS) to reimburse each municipality for 5% of the direct costs of paying benefits incurred through its GA program,*
- 6 *Directs DHHS to establish and provide overseers with access to a statewide database for tracking applicants for the GA program and expenses relating to the program, and*
- 7 *Requires DHHS to provide assistance to municipalities with regard to processing applications for the GA program and directs the Department to establish a hotline that is available 24 hours per day in order to provide consistent, accurate advice to overseers. It also requires the department to respond to requests for assistance within 24 hours*

LD 1426 would ensure there is an adequate safety net through common sense changes to the GA program. This bill makes improvements and streamlines GA laws/policies to remove barriers and simplify access/use specifically for housing. The changes this bill makes would essentially allow GA rental assistance to function similar to rental subsidies like Section 8 by tying the rent maximums to 110% of fair market rent, and by extending the period of eligibility to one year for people covered by an annual lease. These changes to GA rental assistance are long overdue and would assist thousands of vulnerable Mainers in remaining stably housed and preventing homelessness.

GA administration varies greatly throughout Maine. This bill would improve uniformity across the state, make it more equitable, and create a reasonable rate of State reimbursement for GA costs borne by municipalities. And this bill would solve many programmatic inconsistencies, improving our system of care and our safety net for Maine's most vulnerable people.

General assistance is Maine's safety net of last resort. It protects thousands of Mainers by keeping a roof over their heads when they have nowhere else to turn. We will all be better for having an improved General Assistance program in Maine. People would be better served by their local GA programs if this bill were to become law.

Thank you for the opportunity to comment.