

Public Testimony in Support of L.D. 1710: An Act to Establish the Maine Rental Assistance and Guarantee Program and Amend the Laws Regarding Tenants and the Municipal General Assistance Program” or “The HOME Act”

Good morning, Senator Pierce, Representative Gere, and honorable members of the Housing Committee. My name is Brenna Jones, I live in the Greater Bangor area and I am here today to testify in favor of L.D. 1710.

For the past few years I have been an activist for the homeless in the Bangor area, am on the Leadership Team for the Greater Bangor Houseless Collective and the Co-Coordinator of The Peace and Justice Center., I have weekly conversations through our outreach in the Bangor encampments. I also, for the past 2 years, have been researching precarious housing and homelessness in Maine by interviewing impacted people.

Today I would like to share with you some stories that highlight current problems with housing vouchers and general assistance in Maine. One person that I interviewed was a woman I'll call Sally, who has been living in a shelter for the past year or so. With no support from family, Sally went to college for 4 years to become an accountant before having to drop out due to lack of funding and losing her housing. She mentioned several times her dream of finishing her last semesters of college and working in accounting. Unfortunately, for years, Sally struggled to find housing, a well-paying job, or adequate support while living in Maine. At one point, while working as a bookkeeper at Hannaford, they would only offer her a part-time position, leaving her with no options but to continue staying in various shelters, couch surfing, or with friends. I asked Sally what support she needed in order to gain housing, and she said, "Section 8 housing is great. Well, I've been on the Section 8 Housing waitlist since 2017." She had been on the waitlist for over 5 years, with no end in sight. I think it's important to highlight that Sally has gone through the motions of signing up for assistance and trying to find affordable housing, only for half a decade to still find herself nowhere closer to securing housing.

Even individuals I talked to that finally secured vouchers still experienced homelessness due to the discrimination against housing vouchers and general assistance. One woman I spoke to at the encampment told me that she had gotten a housing voucher over a year prior but was unable to find a landlord that would accept the voucher, even with a case manager helping her. This is not an unusual case at the encampment I work in. Many people are sleeping outside in 0 degree weather for months or even years after receiving rental assistance programs and housing vouchers. It is imperative that we ensure that people who sleep for months outside are able to use the vouchers that they've acquired.

These stories are far from anomalies and are closer to the norm in our unhoused communities. This is a statewide issue where our neighbors, friends, family, and communities are suffering outside

because their housing vouchers are no good in our Maine towns and cities. This is not only an issue of lack of housing, but a question of who is able to access that housing. I support LD 1710, as a community member, an activist for the unhoused, and a researcher studying this issue. Passing LD 1710 would help our unhoused community have better access to sustainable housing, would help lessen waitlists for assistance, and make it easier for Mainers to use housing programs like Section 8 and GA. We would be one step closer to addressing the housing crisis facing Maine communities right now.

Thank you very much for your time.

Sincerely,

Brenna Jones

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