



Testimony of Lucia Chomeau Hunt, Esq.
Pine Tree Legal Assistance, Inc.

Speaking in Support of LD 1710

An Act to Establish the Maine Rental Assistance and Guarantee Program and Amend the Laws Regarding Tenants and the Municipal General Assistance Program

Date of Public Hearing: May 12, 2023

Senator Pierce, Representative Gere, and members of the Joint Standing Committee on Housing, my name is Lucia Chomeau Hunt. I am the directing attorney of Family Law and Victim Rights at Pine Tree Legal Assistance, Inc., and I am speaking to you today in support of LD 1710, An Act to Establish the Maine Rental Assistance and Guarantee Program and Amend the Laws Regarding Tenants and the Municipal General Assistance Program.

I have been asked to share the perspective of Pine Tree Legal Assistance on these issues and I am speaking today on behalf of Pine Tree Legal Assistance (Pine Tree). Pine Tree is a nonprofit organization with offices in Portland, Lewiston, Augusta, Bangor, Machias, and Presque Isle. Since 1967, Pine Tree Legal Assistance has provided free legal services to low-income people throughout the State of Maine.

In addition to the housing and public benefits work that Pine Tree Legal Assistance handles, attorneys in Pine Tree's statewide Family Law and Victim Rights unit represent survivors of domestic violence, sexual assault, and stalking. In 2022, we represented survivors in 1,333 cases, primarily Protection from Abuse, family matters, and other civil legal cases related to the violence they have experienced.

This bill is important for survivors. Implicit in the chaos that survivors and their families face when seeking protection from abuse and violence is the reality of unstable and unaffordable housing. This bill establishes a rental assistance program, prohibits discrimination against tenants with housing vouchers, and develops a comprehensive application for assistance, among other important protections that will benefit survivors.

Interpersonal Violence and Homelessness

According to the National Network to End Domestic Violence, **domestic violence is a leading cause of homelessness for women and their children**¹. Many victims face homelessness when

¹ https://nnev.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/07/Library_TH_2018_DV_Housing_Homelessness.pdf

they flee abusive homes. Their experiences are confounded by economic instability, often perpetuated by abusers.² In Maine, the impact of economic abuse on domestic abuse survivors notably impacts their ability to provide for their family's basic needs, including housing.³ Nationally, over 90% of homeless women have experienced severe physical or sexual abuse at some point in their lives, and 63% have been victims of intimate partner violence as adults.⁴ **A lack of alternative housing often leads women to stay in or return to violent relationships.**⁵

The lack of affordable housing has a clear impact on survivors Pine Tree represents. This problem is illustrated by a client that we are currently representing who lives in a rural area of Maine. She was assaulted by her partner, and she and their child went to stay with relatives temporarily. Our client filed for Protection from Abuse and was granted an order after hearing, including child support. Our client works overnights so that the other members of the household can provide child care while the child is asleep. However, she is unable to find or afford her own housing, and for this reason is planning to return to the violent relationship.

This bill will help survivors like our client secure housing and keep their families safe.

Access to Assistance Programs

This bill would ensure that application for general assistance, emergency assistance, and rental assistance is more streamlined. Importantly, the bill requires municipalities to be trauma-informed, and culturally and linguistically appropriate when administering the programs. **These programs are crucial for survivors so they can meet their basic needs while they establish lives free of violence.** Just last week I helped a client who I am representing in a separate matter fill out paperwork that was part of his application for GA. He is a Lingala-speaking high school student, but the application was provided to him in French. Fortunately we were able to assist him, but he was extremely concerned because he didn't understand what the paperwork said.

Thank you to Representative Golek and this committee for considering these important protections. I urge you to pass LD 1710. **This bill will help survivors secure housing and meet their basic needs, allowing survivors and their families to rebuild their lives free of violence.**

² id .

³ https://www.mcedv.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/02/Economic-Abuse-Report_FINAL.pdf

⁴ https://nnedv.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/07/Library_TH_2018_DV_Housing_Homelessness.pdf

⁵ <https://www.aclu.org/sites/default/files/pdfs/dvhomelessness032106.pdf>