



Free Legal Help for Maine's Seniors

May 12, 2023

Testimony of John Brautigam, Esq., Legal Services for the Elderly, in support of LD 1710.

Senator Pierce, Representative Gere, and honorable members of the Joint Standing Committee on Health Coverage, Insurance and Financial Services:

On behalf of Legal Services for the Elderly we testify 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. We thank Rep. Golek for bringing forward this legislation. We received the sponsor's amendment a few days ago, so our testimony addresses the bill as modified by that amendment.

Legal Services for the Elderly (LSE) is a nonprofit legal services organization with the mission of providing free legal assistance to Maine's older adults when their basic human needs are threatened. Next year we will mark our 50th year serving this population.

The single issue we see most often with our clients is housing. Our clients are experiencing housing scarcity, insecurity, and unaffordability. Each week we handle numerous evictions. We do everything possible to defend and assist those who could be removed from their homes for their inability to pay rent – or for no reason at all.

In a state with our resources, this is an avoidable tragedy. And it constitutes public policy malpractice. We can and must do more for this population.

We often hear about the housing crisis. I would respectfully submit that there is not just one crisis – there are many different crises occurring simultaneously.

Yes, almost everyone has seen rent increase or home purchase prices rise. And yes, many municipalities are struggling with options for constructing new housing. But the crisis of those who sleep each night in a cold, leaky tent or under a bridge, or who live on the brink of losing their shelter, is the most heartbreaking of all. There can be no solution to “the housing crisis” until we address the basic need of this population.

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The approach in LD 1710 makes good sense. The program it creates would target financial resources to those most in need. It would also support local administrators and Maine Housing and the Department of Health and Human Services. It won't eliminate every obstacle, but it will ameliorate the worst crisis for many. It has a price tag commensurate with the scope and severity of the problem.

Others will testify on the policy details but allow me to leave you with three stories.

Dorothy is 65 years of age and has been living on the street for two years. She worked for 30 years in a service industry job but has been unable to hold down employment due to declining health. She is not qualified to receive enough assistance to afford her own place and she is not eligible for care in a residential facility. She has been turned away repeatedly from shelters that are at capacity.

Fatima is 30 years of age and has a two-year old son with asthma. She also has a five-year old daughter with behavioral diagnoses. Until last year Fatima and her children lived in an apartment with the father of the children. After a series of abusive encounters, Fatima took the children to live in an emergency shelter. The shelter has now closed. She has no family in the area, and she is out of options. The little family of three now lives in a nylon tent.

Jim is a veteran of the war in Iraq suffering from post-traumatic stress syndrome. He has received assistance from fellow veterans and from the Veterans Administration, but not enough to afford an apartment to call his own. He now lives in a tent just off the highway. Each time he experiences lightning and thunder he is transported back to the battle lines, leaving him exhausted and disoriented from fear and trauma.

For reasons of confidentiality, we do not identify specific clients. But I believe these composite stories are typical of life in Maine for far too many. They show that the most vulnerable among us bear the brunt of the inequitable allocation of housing and other resources even while many live in great comfort. The shame is not that of Dorothy, Fatima and Jim. It is all of ours.

Thank you for considering our testimony and for making a new commitment to the unhoused population and those suffering from housing insecurity. We ask that you support LD 1710.