



May 12, 2023

Honorable Senator Pierce and Representative Gere and Members of the Committee on Housing,

I am here today to 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 (The HOME Act)" Address Maine's housing crisis.

My name is Michelle Lamm, and I am the Executive Director of Greater Portland Family Promise. Family Promise provides shelter, housing navigation, and housing mentorship to help families access safe affordable housing and to be successful tenants in their new homes. GPPF also provides rental assistance and support with other necessities such as food, transportation, and laundry.

100% of the families that we are currently serving are New Mainers families from African countries that are here seeking asylum in the U.S. The families we serve desperately need access to affordable housing and rely on safety net programs such as General Assistance and other rent relief programs.

Families are experiencing housing and food insecurity and having to make the impossible choice of having to choose between paying their rent and paying for other necessities like food, healthcare, or transportation.

People are better able to fully participate in their communities and thrive when they have adequate shelter, nutrition, and health care. General Assistance invests in people and their wellbeing as they work towards financial security. General Assistance is one of the many supports that helps Mainers to achieve sustainable independence.

Maine is currently experiencing a housing crisis. In just 3 months The City of Portland reported that there were over 1,000 new arrivals requesting the need for shelter and food. Maine Housing estimates that Maine is currently 20,000 units short of what is needed to end the affordable housing shortage. Current wages and voucher programs aren't keeping up with rising rents leaving families almost no access to housing. We have families that have been on our waiting list for housing for 1 and half years.

Additionally, wages are not keeping up with the rising cost of housing. A single-earning household cannot afford to pay today's rents. The minimum wage does not provide a living wage for most American families. A typical family of four (two working adults, two children) needs to work more than - - two full-time minimum-wage jobs (that is a 98-hour work week per working adult) to earn a living wage.

Maine needs housing stability for asylum seeking families while they wait for their work authorization and seek employment. The journey to self-sufficiency is a long, arduous, and complicated process and it can take 18 months for someone to receive their work authorization. Voucher programs like General Assistance and rent relief programs like the Emergency Rental Assistance program give families the safety and stability on their journey to independence.

Most landlords that Family Promise or the families themselves reach out to won't accept General Assistance. This leaves a very small pool of affordable units available to low- or no-income renters. We need legislation that prohibits landlords from discriminating against tenants who have rental assistance vouchers so that all housing is an option for these families.

Family Promise has enough funds to cover up to one month's rent for a family, but Maine also needs an ongoing, consistent, reliable rent relief program to help individuals and families to cover gaps in rent payment when there is a disruption or delay in voucher payment or there is temporary job loss or unemployment.

Creating affordable, safe, stable housing prevents homelessness, supports families and children, and helps to maintain Maine's economic stability. When people have stable housing, adequate nutrition, and good health, they are better able to consistently participate in the workforce. Access to housing and food enhances the wellbeing of Mainers and reduces social service costs by providing targeted health and social services and helps end the cycle of poverty for families. While families wait to receive their work authorization, they are working on furthering their education and increasing their skills, attending school, completing certificate and higher education degree programs.

Again, families desperately need access to housing, food and other basic needs to be able to provide for themselves and their families. Creating more affordable housing and rent relief programs can help move families out of homelessness and into stable housing where they can lead happy, healthy, productive lives and help support Maine's economy.

I urge you to vote in support 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 (The HOME Act)" Address Maine's housing crisis.

Thank you.