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**Testimony on behalf of Maine Equal Justice in *Support* of LD 853, RESOLUTION,  
Proposing an Amendment to the Constitution of Maine to Establish a Right to Housing.  
January 23, 2024**

Good afternoon, Senator Pierce, Representative Gere, distinguished members of the Special Committee on Housing. My name is Andrea Steward, I use she/her pronouns, and I am a policy advocate at Maine Equal Justice. We are a civil legal services organization, and we work with and for people with low incomes seeking solutions to poverty through policy, education, and legal representation to increase economic security, opportunity, and equity for people in Maine. Thank you for the opportunity to offer testimony in support of LD 853.

Housing is fundamental to every aspect of our lives. As essential as the air in our lungs. Housing is healthcare. Housing is public safety. Housing is public health. Housing is the foundation to which we build the rest of our lives on, and without it cannot fully attain several other inalienable rights granted to us such as safety and security<sup>1</sup>. Housing is crucial to maintain our physical and psychological health, to gain access to educational opportunities, economic outcomes, and overall quality of life.<sup>2</sup>

As a result of the systemic challenges in Maine's housing system, many fall into homelessness every year in both urban and rural communities across the state. When they do, many basic activities that we do in the comfort of our homes – such as resting, sleeping, drinking, and necessary functions to maintain our health and wellbeing – are criminal offenses for people experiencing homelessness, under ordinances that prohibit loitering, sleeping outside, consumption of alcohol, and other behaviors. As such, those who are most vulnerable in our society are being constantly criminalized for just trying to survive.

Maine saw a 16% increase in eviction filings in 2023<sup>3</sup> most of which were for nonpayment of rent. Maine's extremely low-income households face the biggest risks of housing instability with nearly 72% of these households paying more than 30% of their monthly income towards rent, and 52% paying more than half their monthly income.

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<sup>1</sup> Urban Institute. Naming Housing as a Human Right Is A First Step to Solving the Housing Crisis. (Dec. 8, 2021). <https://housingmatters.urban.org/articles/naming-housing-human-right-first-step-solving-housing-crisis>

<sup>2</sup> Id.

<sup>3</sup> Bangor Daily News. Eviction filings increased 16 percent in Maine last year. (Jan 19, 2024) <https://www.bangordailynews.com/2024/01/19/state/state-housing/maine-eviction-filings-rise-2023/>

Chronic homelessness can have detrimental, life long, and multigenerational impacts on people's health.<sup>4</sup> A report released by the UCLA policy lab which looked at 15 different states, found half of people who are homeless experience what is known as "tri morbidity" or of having a physical health condition, mental health condition, and substance abuse issues.<sup>5</sup> Additionally, individuals face even more barriers to access essential medical care including accessing their daily or maintenance medications, which often leads to more contact with emergency responders and higher utilization of emergency departments and in-patient hospitals. If they can gain access to their medication, they face an additional hurdle of storing their medications, particularly medications that need to be refrigerated such as insulin.<sup>6</sup> Individuals overall have persistently high health care expenditures due to the array of illnesses both physical and mental,<sup>7</sup> but often lack health insurance as those who are housing insecure have a 63% higher chance of losing Medicaid coverage.<sup>8</sup> Unstable housing makes it extremely difficult to maintain steady employment.<sup>9</sup>

Providing stable housing has been shown to decrease incidence of intimate partner violence,<sup>10</sup> recidivism rates,<sup>11</sup> and reduce crime, specifically survival crimes; theft, trespassing and loitering, and sex work as well as reducing the rates of violent crime,<sup>12</sup> Stable housing reduced Medicaid costs by 12 percent, increased access to outpatient and preventative health services, and reduced emergency department use by 18 percent.<sup>13</sup>

Housing doesn't just make it easier to maintain steady employment, healthcare, and the overall wellbeing of yourself and your family, it makes it possible. Whether you're paying a mortgage or paying rent; everyone deserves a safe, affordable, place to call home.

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<sup>4</sup> The Network for Public Health Law, Series: Preventing Housing Instability Fact Sheet, (2021) <https://www.networkforphl.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/04/Fact-Sheet-Public-Health-Implications-of-Housing-Instability-Eviction-and-Homelessness.pdf>

<sup>5</sup> Janey Rountree, Nathan Hess, and Austin Lyke, California Policy Lab, Health Conditions Among Unsheltered Adults in the U.S. (2019). <https://www.capolicylab.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/02/Health-Conditions-Among-Unsheltered-Adults-in-the-U.S..pdf>

<sup>6</sup> The Network for Public Health Law (n4)

<sup>7</sup> The Network for Public Health Law (n4)

<sup>8</sup> ACLU, No EVICTION, *supra* note 5, at 6; THE NETWORK FOR PUBLIC HEALTH LAW, THE PUBLIC HEALTH IMPLICATIONS OF HOUSING INSTABILITY, EVICTION, AND HOMELESSNESS (2021), <https://www.networkforphl.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/04/Fact-Sheet-Public-Health-Implications-of-Housing-Instability-Eviction-and-Homelessness.pdf>.

<sup>9</sup> ACLU, No EVICTION, *supra* note 5, at 3.

<sup>10</sup> The Network for Public Health Law (n4)

<sup>11</sup> HUD, Promoting Mental Health Through Housing Stability (2022). <https://www.huduser.gov/portal/pdredge/pdr-edge-trending-053122.html>

<sup>12</sup> Kimberly Burrowes, Urban Institute, Can Housing Interventions Reduce Incarceration and Recidivism (2019). <https://housingmatters.urban.org/articles/can-housing-interventions-reduce-incarceration-and-recidivism>

<sup>13</sup> The Network for Public Health Law (n4)