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*Testimony of Rep. Cheryl Golek introducing  
LD 2158, An Act to Improve the Housing Voucher System  
Before the Joint Select Committee on Housing*

Senator Pierce, Representative Gere, and distinguished members of the Joint Select Committee on Housing, my name is Cheryl Golek. I represent House District 99, consisting of the Town of Harpswell and Brunswick. I am pleased to introduce **LD 2158, An Act to Improve the Housing Voucher System**.

Today, I want to discuss how we can continue supporting our neighbors, Friends, and families who use Section 8 housing, also known as the Housing Choice voucher program. First, I want to acknowledge how important this program is.

You have all most likely heard me say on more than one occasion that without Section 8 Housing, I would not be where I am today. In the first session, we listened to many who called this program the golden ticket, a program that, when accessible, works and provides housing security and allows a lift for people climbing out of poverty. We also heard the stories of being on a waitlist for years, getting the voucher, being given 60 to 90 days to search, and then having that voucher expire. Can you imagine what it must feel like to wait seven years for a voucher to secure affordable, safe housing for you and your children or yourself? Maybe it was your aging parents or someone in your family with a disability who was then given a few months to search in a jurisdiction and then lost the only hope of affording housing. Sadly, we don't have to imagine what that is like, as it happens yearly to thousands of people in our state.

When I say this is a life-saving program, that is not a slogan; it is a fact, a hard truth, as people have received vouchers and not had time to secure housing and had their vouchers expire and then lost their lives because of lack of shelter from the elements.

To this day, section 8 housing remains the only rental assistance program in the state that is accessible for folks living at 30% of the average median income. A population consisting primarily of older or disabled adults, if you are at 30% AMI, there is virtually no rental housing available to you without a subsidy.

So, now that I have done my best to explain the importance of this program to everyone. Let me move to what my hope and intent of this bill is.

My bill endeavors to improve upon the foundation of the housing voucher system, which, according to Maine Housing, has more than 22,500 people on the waitlist.

District 99: Brunswick (Part), Harpswell

At this point, one may ask how we can improve a federal program.

While it is true this is a federal program, there is some flexibility at a state level within the program, and there is also a way to request a waiver to have the ability to pay higher rental rates.

Some Issues that could be addressed at a state level that could make our housing choice voucher system work better for the people in need of securing affordable housing.

First, we could request that the work be done by every public housing authority in our state that is not already requesting a voucher waiver to keep at FMR to do so, as Maine State Housing does yearly. Now, I am fully aware that not all housing authorities are as big as Maine State Housing, and they do not have the resources or staff to do this, which is why I am requesting Maine State Housing work with the state public housing authorities to accomplish this. This is an essential piece to making this program work better, as we have heard from some landlords in this room that they do not accept Section 8 because it simply does not pay enough. In some places in our state, they are correct, so if we can secure a waiver to increase the FMR and allow housing authorities to enter a higher rate than the fair market rental rate established by the United States Department of Housing and Urban Development. We will be able to attract more landlords to participate in this program.

Does this bill promise that HUD will allow our housing authorities to pay more than they already are? No, it does not, but to my knowledge, HUD has allowed Housing authorities that have requested this type of waiver to do so. One example would be Maine State housing, but I am told others have had the same success. We talk a lot about ways to give more incentives to landlords to participate in this program, and this bill could be a way to do just that.

The second thing that public housing authorities have the flexibility to change is the search times people have once they are issued a voucher—these search times vary across our state. The Federal program mandates a time to search for housing to be set at a minimum of 60 days, but there is no maximum set. The public housing authorities have the flexibility to maximize the search times allowed. For example, Maine state housing gives 120 days with the ability to request another 120 days and, in some cases, up to one year. Yet another housing authority only allows 60 days to search. It only stands to reason that maximizing the search time, especially during the housing crises we are currently experiencing, would allow for more people to secure housing and fewer vouchers to expire.

When I asked why some housing authorities would not allow a more extended search time, I was told because they could not release another voucher until it was used. This practice does not maximize the potential of using the voucher. If a person doesn't secure housing in, say, 60 days, that voucher expires, and that person who may have waited seven years can, at that point, reapply if they choose to. Allowing maximum time may make the next person in line wait a little longer, but it will also allow maximum potential for each person to find and secure housing.

The third thing public housing authorities have the flexibility to do is to allow people to expand their search for housing outside the jurisdiction of where they received it. When you receive a voucher, you must look for housing within that jurisdiction and live there for at least 12 months. With the housing shortage, people would have a greater chance of securing housing if they could search within the state borders. Again, I am told some housing authorities are already doing this.

I am simply asking that all of them do it so that those with a voucher are given the maximum potential to use it.

The last ask in my bill is for some consistency to be put in place across all Public housing authorities, such as time frames to search and to expand the search areas, as well as regularly updating and submitting FMR waivers to HUD as needed and working together with Maine state housing to educate landlords on how this program works by applying basic regulation across the board will make it easier for potential tenants and landlords to understand how the program works.

We have the flexibility with this great program at a state level to make this life-saving program work better than it currently is, and we can house more people and expire fewer vouchers.

If passed, as the bill is written, it would direct the Maine State Housing Authority to collect the data necessary to request a waiver of the Fair Market Rent set by the Department of Housing and Urban Development so that the Maine State Housing Authority and other local housing authorities can enter into contracts with landlords at the highest rent allowed by the Department of Housing and Urban Development.

Without that data, we are unable to request an increase. There are twenty-three housing authorities that the Maine State Housing Authority could potentially work with to help pull the information needed together to submit the waivers.

I was asked if the Maine State Housing Authority could even have the legality to do this. The answer is that they could have that authority, but it would take us to make it happen. We have given Maine State Housing the authority to manage this federal program in the past when we directed them to create a centralized waitlist, so yes, it is possible.

The bill would also allow Maine Housing and municipal housing authorities to maximize time frames for folks with vouchers to search for and secure housing anywhere in the state.

I want to state that I am personally incredibly grateful and appreciative of all the work that the public housing authorities across the state put in day in and day out to facilitate this program. I know how vital their work is, and I can only imagine how trying and emotional it can also be.

We have the flexibility with this great program at a state level to make this life-saving program work better than it currently is, and we can house more people and expire fewer vouchers.

I am fully open to listening today and applying changes where needed in this bill. I'm sure with some changes and working together, we can accomplish the goals of this bill and make it work better for those in need and more attractive to landlords to participate in.

We do have the ability at a state level to make this program work better and house more people. Let's work together and make that happen.

Thank you for allowing me to present LD 2158; I am happy to answer any questions.