

Testimony neither for nor against LD 2158, “An Act to Improve the Housing Voucher System.”

**Josie Phillips, Policy Fellow
 January 30th, 2024**

Good afternoon, chairpersons Gere and Pierce, and all members of the Housing committee. My name is Josie Phillips, and I am representing Maine Center for Economic Policy, testifying neither for nor against LD 2158.

The restrictions placed on Housing Choice Vouchers have significantly impeded vouchers’ ability to meet the challenges presented by the affordable housing crisis. By standardizing the Housing Choice Voucher (HCV) program across the state, LD 2158 would pave the way to improving vouchers’ ability to provide meaningful support to families.

For instance, while vouchers are technically transferable between Public Housing Authorities (PHAs), this process can be onerous to a family currently engaged in a housing search, and the request for a transfer may be rejected or result in being placed on another waitlist. Standardizing the administration of the HCV program across the state should ease the administrative difficulty of transporting vouchers, and allowing families to broaden their search across the entire state will open up more options, enabling more vouchers to see use.

Another restriction that LD 2158 attempts to address has to do with the amount of time voucher recipients have to conduct their housing search before the voucher expires. PHAs are required to provide families with a minimum search period of 60 days, although some provide more time and may offer extensions if requested. Given the fierce competition for the scarce units available, it is simply impossible for many voucher recipients to find housing in the time they are allotted.¹ This likely contributed to the fact that of the 524 vouchers issued by Maine Housing in 2023, 162 expired.

While LD 2158 aims to address the very real impediments to the ability of Housing Choice Vouchers to provide meaningful support to families, its approach of seeking waivers through HUD is not entirely appropriate. For instance, Maine Housing already requests waivers allowing it to exceed the traditional payment standards of between 90-110% Fair Market Rent,^{2 3} increasing the allowed rents to up to 120% FMR. Similarly, while the time limits set by PHAs do make it much more difficult for recipients to use their vouchers, these limits are set by the local PHAs themselves. HUD only mandates the minimum period of 60 days. Instead of requesting a waiver through HUD, the Legislature could require Maine PHAs to increase their minimum search periods to 90 or 120 days.

The potential for this kind of standardization across PHAs is the most promising element of LD 2158. While LD 2158 would not accomplish this directly, it would have Maine Housing suggest legislation requiring PHAs to align their voucher administration with that of Maine Housing. Running the HCV program in a more uniform way across the state would help ease the administrative burden of policies like allowing voucher recipients to conduct statewide housing searches. It could also provide a more effective floor to ensure that more families receive the time they need to actually use their vouchers, rather than letting the assistance slip through their fingers.

Officers	Board of Directors	
Barbara Burt, Chair	Maulian Bryant	Stacy Mitchell
Lucy Van Hook, Vice-Chair	Jessica Maurer	Matt Schlobohm
Pamela Cox, Treasurer		
Ben Chin, Secretary		

No one who has waited years, sometimes up to seven years, for housing assistance should lose that assistance simply because there wasn't any housing to be found. The Housing Choice Voucher system is the cornerstone of the housing safety net, and I strongly encourage this committee to consider ways to make this program more efficient and effective in providing sorely needed relief to Maine families.

ⁱ Maine Public, "In tight market, low-income renters can wait years for federal vouchers and still not find a home." February, 2023. <https://www.mainepublic.org/2023-02-13/in-tight-market-low-income-renters-can-wait-years-for-federal-vouchers-and-still-not-find-a-home>

ⁱⁱ Maine Housing, "Program Waivers -- HCV Department." https://www.mainehousing.org/docs/default-source/rental/hcv-covid-19-waivers.pdf?sfvrsn=d3a58a15_11

ⁱⁱⁱ U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development, "NOTICE PIH 2023-29." October, 2023. <https://www.hud.gov/sites/dfiles/PIH/documents/PIH2023-29.pdf>