

Budget Hearing, Housing

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Senator Rotundo, Representative Sachs, honorable members of the AFA and Housing Committees: My name is Stephanie. I live in Augusta and I am here to testify in favor of the funding for housing programs proposed in this budget. I am also here to ask you to use your power to address the need for rent relief in this budget as well. Being homeless is one of the worst types of crises that a person can go through. It's exhausting to not know for sure if your family will be safe and warm. I know this from personal experience.

When my son was 2, our family was given notice that we had to move out of the house we'd been renting since before he was born. We'd done nothing wrong, the landlords just wanted to move their adult kids in. We quickly found a new place that we could afford. The day that we moved in was the only time we ever saw that landlord. He didn't tell us he was selling the place.

A new landlord bought it and the rent went up 9 months later. We were still able to pay, but this meant I had to work into the 8th month of my pregnancy. It went up again when my daughter was only 4 months old. We could no longer afford to pay and got evicted. Our family spent the next 7 months sleeping on the floors of friends, relatives, and even strangers.

In those 7 months, we stayed in 8 different places. This was particularly difficult for my son who was 4 years old, autistic, and struggled with change. He'd been uprooted from the school he loved, the routines he was used to, and everything he knew. He expressed this by making big messes and getting into trouble. It was hard on us and the families that we stayed with. Some places we were only allowed to stay a few days.

While staying with some relatives, we were told about the BRAP voucher program.

When we applied, we found out we weren't homeless enough. We were told if we slept in our car or in a public space, and this was witnessed by either the police or a member of the clergy, we could get the voucher. Luckily, we had a vehicle to sleep in and our relatives had a pastor who could vouch for us. Our kids needed a home, so that's exactly what we did and we got a place.

At this point, that was many years ago. My son is now 20 and my daughter 16. We've lived in the same home for 10 years now and it's been nice. For the first 5 years though, my son would beg me to never make him move again. He was afraid he'd have to leave his friend group and we'd lose our cats again. I've worried about these same things. We need statewide rent relief, so when rents go up no one is forced to leave their home, community, or experience what I had to. Thank you for your time.