

Budget Testimony: Housing Sections

Rina Rengouwa

23 February 2024

Good afternoon Senator Rotundo, Representative Sachs and members of the AFA and Housing Committees. Hello, Senator Pierce and Representative Gere. It is good to see you.

My name is Rina Rengouwa, I am originally from Gabon and now Freeport, Maine is my home. I am a mother of two, a girl who is soon to be 16 and a little boy soon to be 3 years old. My husband and I are both students at Southern Maine Community College. He studies HVAC and I am studying Business Administration. My husband also just graduated from the Union Construction Academy and is excited to start work in his field. I am grateful that after 11 months without a home, I now have an apartment and my family is safe and together. Things are coming together for us and it's been a long journey which is why I testify today to share our story about the systems that supported us getting here today.

I remember what it was like before we had an apartment. While living in the hotel, it was not easy to share a room with my soon-to-be-16-year-old daughter, my son, and my husband. We cooked in the shower. We've all had depression at some point. Waiting lists for housing, or for help to get housing, are very long. Homelessness is a serious problem, and something must be done. Thousands of people across the state are living in motels, their cars, campers and outside right now. Thousands more are facing eviction because rents have gone up so much.

Our neighbor when we moved to Freeport was a disabled man. We became friends. We would talk and share a meal. The rent went up and he couldn't pay. He is on the Section 8 waiting list. He is now homeless, sleeping outside in the Maine winter. His apartment still remains empty after several months. Many people have come to look at the apartment, but the rent is too high for many to afford it.

It is very difficult having access to an affordable home right now in Maine. When we were looking for a place, we found a two-bedroom apartment in Biddeford for \$1,990. 2 bedrooms, almost \$2,000 a month. Even with two people working full time at minimum wage, you couldn't afford this and other basic needs.

Today I decided to testify, to tell my story, and to sound the alarm. Ladies and gentlemen, legislators, we are aware of the investments you are making for the well-being of the people of Maine. But there is still a lot to do. As a member of the Maine Equal Justice housing leadership team, who has worked on the issue of rent relief for almost two years now, I know now more than ever that rent relief must be part of the response to the housing crisis we see in Maine. We must make housing accessible to all people in Maine. Low income renters across the state need assistance, and we need equity. Please include rent relief in the budget to help address the realities that the inhabitants of Maine are facing every day.