

19 Colby Street
Waterville



Mid-Maine
Homeless Shelter
& Services
Hope Starts Here
www.shelterme.org

Waterville, ME
04901

MID-MAINE HOMELESS SHELTER & SERVICES

DR. KATIE SPENCER WHITE, CHIEF EXECUTIVE OFFICER
(207) 872-8082 (♦207)872-6550 ♦ FAX: (207) 872-0834
shelter@ShelterMe.org ♦ www.shelterme.org

March 3, 2025

Dear Senator Carney, Representative Kuhn, and the Honorable members of the Judiciary Committee:

Re: In Favor of LD521 An Act to Prohibit Discrimination in Housing Based on Source of Income, Veteran Status or Military Status

I am the President & CEO of the Mid-Maine Homeless Shelter & Services in Waterville. We serve low-wealth and vulnerable community members across Kennebec and Somerset Counties.

As you are all aware, the crisis of homelessness in Maine is getting worse. Year after year, we see more and more people in our communities confronting the preventable tragedy of homelessness. I have no doubt that every one of you has fielded desperate calls from constituents begging for help finding housing.

If it wasn't already abundantly clear, the housing system is broken. LD521 gives you an opportunity to fix one part of it.

For the last 50 years, our system for preventing homelessness has been based on the idea that all tenants - including low-income tenants - should be able to choose where they live. Since 1974 when Congress passed the Housing and Community Development Act which established the section 8 program, we have operated on the rational belief that consumers should decide for themselves where they will live. We rejected the failed approach of building large tracts of public housing because by the 1970s, many people were stuck in poverty, trapped in public housing that was increasingly expensive to maintain.

Instead, we decided that a market-based solution that gave control to tenants and leveraged private housing would maximize freedom of choice and help poor households leave behind concentrated poverty and select housing in high opportunity communities where they could improve their families prospects.

But this approach only works when it is accepted by landlords. Sadly, far too many landlords do not, which has devastating consequences for people, especially the very old, the very young, the disabled, and our veterans and military families.

When someone is awarded a rental subsidy like a s.8 Housing Choice Voucher or a HUD-Veterans Affairs Supportive Housing voucher (HUD-VASH) voucher, it should signal a very quick return to housing. But

"Providing Emergency Food & Shelter to Homeless and Displaced Persons in central Maine"

"Founded by the Interfaith Council in 1990"

equally as often, these households lose their voucher after several months of fruitless house searching, turned away time and again by landlords who say no, not because the prospective tenant has a poor rental history, but because the landlord has made a decision to reject the method of payment.

LD521 would do nothing more than prevent landlords from denying people with a government backed guarantee of payment access to housing.

Landlords constantly worry that SOI laws will constitute an undue burden. Research and practice indicate these concerns, though understandable, do not bear up under scrutiny. There are many acceptable reasons to reject a tenant's application for housing. Landlords can still conduct background checks, they can require deposits, and ask for references. They can still vet every application to make sure they are selecting good tenants. What they won't be able to do is reject people who must pay rent with a state or federal voucher. What we want to prevent are rejections based on stigma rather than fact, or perception of risk rather than actual harm.

This will serve many positive outcomes - people will find housing more quickly, creating new "flow" through the shelter system. Households with children will not be as frequently subjected to invasive and terrifying child welfare investigations. And veterans - who are for homeless service providers a priority - should be a priority for all of us. One more positive point - research also indicates that property values slightly increase in neighborhoods where voucher holders live.

Some may argue that veteran or military status is not a protected class because it isn't an "immutable" and unchanging characteristic which subjects it to civil rights law. Neither is religion or family status, and both are protected under the Fair Housing Act of 1968, and the Fair Housing Act 1989. Legislatures have always had the right to expand by statute where the common law is constrained. In fact 17 states and dozens of counties and municipalities have already done it, and those laws have all withstood judicial scrutiny.

Nor is there an argument that this proposed statute "preempts" the voluntary nature of the s.8 Housing choice Voucher program. In fact, this argument was explicitly rejected by the Maine Court in *S. Me. Landlord Ass'n v. City of Portland* (2021).

This is a small but mighty bill that will do a lot of good for people who need a hand up. This is exactly the kind of bill we need at this exact moment and I urge you to vote ought to pass.

Kind regards,



Dr. Katie Spencer White
President & CEO, Mid-Maine Homelessness & Services

Katie@shelterme.org

(207) 692-4421

"Providing Emergency Food & Shelter to Homeless and Displaced Persons in central Maine"
"Founded by the Interfaith Council in 1990"

References:

Bell, A., Sard, B., & Koepnick, B. (2018). Prohibiting discrimination against renters using housing vouchers improves results. Center on Budget and Policy Priorities December, 20.

Galvez, M., & Knudsen, B. (2024). Discrimination Against Voucher Holders and the Laws to Prevent It. Cityscape, 26(2), 145-162.

Keefe, J. (2025). New federal data shows Maine's child welfare agency is moving against national trends. The Maine Monitor.

Pitkin, B., Elder, K., & DeRuiter-Williams, D. (2022). Building a housing justice framework. Urban Institute.

Rofael, M. E. (2019). Improving the Housing Choice Voucher Program through source of income discrimination laws. Calif. L. Rev., 107, 1635.

S. Me. Landlord Ass'n v. City of Portland, No. CV-21-40 (Me. Super. Dec. 15, 2021)

Tighe, J. R., Hatch, M. E., & Mead, J. (2017). Source of income discrimination and fair housing policy. Journal of Planning Literature, 32(1), 3-15.

Appendix A: Typical Private Listing for an Apartment

10:20 100%
X Q ...
Send seller a message
Hi, is this available? Send
Alerts Message Share Saved
Description
1 Bedroom 1 Bath Apartment
Winslow
\$950 per month
Rent Includes:
Heat
Water/Sewer
Trash Removal
Lawn Care
Snow Plowing
Tenant Pays Electric
2nd Floor
Proof of Income Required
Needed to move in:
1st month rent and Security Deposit
\$1900
Sorry, no pets
No Vouchers at this time
Seller information Seller details

*“Providing Emergency Food & Shelter to Homeless and Displaced Persons in central Maine”
“Founded by the Interfaith Council in 1990”*