



Testimony of
Erik C. Jorgensen
Senior Director of Government Relations & Communications
Maine State Housing Authority

Before
The Joint Standing Committee on Housing and Economic Development (132nd)
In support of
LD 747 An Act to Provide Funds to Reduce Student Homelessness

Senator Curry, Representative Gere, and members of the Joint Standing Committee on Housing and Economic Development, I am Erik Jorgensen Senior Director of Government Relations and Communications at the Maine State Housing Authority (MaineHousing) and I am submitting this testimony in support of LD 747, *An Act to Provide Funds to Reduce Student Homelessness*.

MaineHousing has been helping Maine people own, rent, repair, and heat their homes since 1969. We are an independent state authority (not a state agency) created to address the problems of unsafe, unsuitable, overcrowded, and unaffordable housing. We are authorized to issue bonds to finance single family mortgages for first time homebuyers and for affordable multi-family housing.

We are also authorized to administer a number of state and federal programs, including rental subsidies, weatherization, fuel assistance, two housing block grants, the low-income housing tax credit program, and homeless grant programs. We receive state general fund revenue for homeless programs and receive a dedicated portion of the real estate transfer tax for the Housing Opportunities for Maine (HOME) Fund.

This bill would continue a recently established \$2,000,000 school-based grant program that was funded in last spring's supplemental budget. This program allows McKinney-Vento Coordinators to engage with housing navigators in order to find a home or otherwise provide direct support to homeless families who have children in school. In January, MaineHousing provided a report to this committee on the progress of that grant program, copies of which are also included here. While the grants were just awarded in January and we don't have any results to report yet from the five districts that received funding, we know that navigation, combined with flexible funding that can be used to meet different needs, is the best practice.

The program envisioned under LD 747 would be used to extend current contracts or to expand the program to different districts. The grants allow districts to hire or contract for a Homelessness Prevention and Housing Navigation Specialist position, who will provide services designed to either assist the student/family in maintaining current housing, or in obtaining new housing that meets their needs. Direct Financial Assistance payments may also be provided to families to cover

expenses that will help them maintain their current housing or obtain new housing. This assistance is intended to be flexible to best meet the needs of the family, but due to the short nature of the program, ongoing rental assistance for current or newly established housing cannot be permanent, hence the need for the navigators.

In the interest of assuring that these funds reach as many of Maine's McKinney-Vento students as possible, the application process prioritizes consideration to Applicants (single SAUs/EUT or collaboratives) that have identified an average of 50 or more homeless students in the past two (2) school years.

NOTE: One important detail from the bill should be changed: Part 2 of the bill specifies that the Authority shall adopt rules to implement this program. In this part, the word "shall" should be changed to "may", because the Authority already has statutory ability to create programs without, in most cases requiring additional rulemaking. This is important, because last year the funds for this program became available in late summer, but the bill required rulemaking, and that three month rulemaking process prevented the funds from being granted until January.

We would therefore urge you to make that small change if you decide to move this legislation forward.

TO: Housing and Economic Development Committee
FROM: Erik C. Jorgensen, Senior Director of Government Relations and Communication

**KKKK-2 STUDENT HOMELESSNESS PREVENTION INITIATIVE
JANUARY 15, 2025, REPORT TO THE LEGISLATURE**

BACKGROUND

Part KKKK-2 was an initiative included in the spring 2024 supplemental budget (LD 2214) providing funding in the amount of \$2 million to create a pilot program aimed at reducing homelessness among students and their families. This funding reflected the intent of LD 1422, a bill sponsored by Representative Michael Brennan. The proposed operational concept was to make funding available as grants to school districts seeking to hire housing navigators and provide related services to students and their families.

Language in the budget stated: “The authority shall consider ways in which the services provided by school-based housing navigators established by the federal McKinney-Vento Homeless Assistance Act could benefit the administration of a rental subsidy program. The program must provide housing subsidies directly to homeless students or to an adult family member or guardian of the homeless student. In developing the program, the authority shall incorporate elements to provide housing subsidies to homeless students who have not reached 18 years of age who do not have adult family members or guardians to secure housing on their behalf. The authority shall report to the joint standing or joint select committee of the Legislature having jurisdiction over housing matters on the progress of the program's development no later than January 15, 2025.”

RULEMAKING

Though it was just \$2 million, this pilot program required rulemaking, which greatly slowed the process of launching the program. This initiative was included as part of MaineHousing’s Homeless Solutions Rule. The rulemaking process started at MaineHousing’s September Board of Commissioners Meeting; a public hearing took place at their October meeting; and the rule was adopted in November.

A notice of funding availability was initially posted on the MaineHousing website on October 3, and the Maine Department of Education notified districts directly of the available funding.

PROGRAM DESIGN AND GRANT COMPETITION

The program was designed to be delivered as grants to interested school districts. No funding was used by MaineHousing for administration or other purposes. MaineHousing worked directly with representatives from the Maine Department of Education's McKinney-Vento office, as well as Representative Brennan, the original bill sponsor, to design the program. The DOE reached out to schools to make them aware of the program.

The program is centered on districts working with local homeless service hubs. From the Notice of Funding Opportunity (NOFO):

The districts will be funded to hire or contract for a Homelessness Prevention and Housing Navigation Specialist position, who will provide services designed to either assist the student/family in maintaining current housing, or in obtaining new housing that meets their needs. Direct Financial Assistance payments may also be provided to families to cover expenses that will help them maintain their current housing or obtain new housing. This assistance is intended to be flexible to best meet the needs of the family, but due to the short nature of the program, ongoing rental assistance for current or newly established housing must not exceed six months of payments.

In the interest of assuring that these funds reach as many of Maine's McKinney-Vento students as possible, the application process gave priority consideration to Applicants (single SAUs/EUT or collaboratives) that have identified an average of 50 or more homeless students in the past two (2) school years.

SCORING AND ADJUDICATION:

One week prior to the initial application deadline, only two districts had submitted proposals. The decision was made to extend the NOFO, and the DOE enhanced its outreach to districts. By the new deadline, the program had received eleven applications from around the state. Overall, there were four applicants that did not meet threshold and therefore were not scored. Of the seven applicants that were scored, the total funding requested was \$4,987,838, which was \$2,987,000 more than was available.

A proposal review team comprised of representatives from MaineHousing and Maine Department of Education met to review proposals at MaineHousing's offices on January 9, 2025.

After scoring, the review team fully funded the top three proposals and partially funded the fourth and fifth applications, both because parts of those proposals were broader than the scope of the NOFA, and because the total funding available was only \$2million.

The final two applicants that were scored were not funded. Please see a summary of the five scored applicants and their recommended funding below:

Applicant	Town/Area	# Expected to Serve	Notes	Award Amount
Biddeford	Biddeford/York County	200 Students (125 HHs)	Includes RSU23, RSU57, Saco, Sanford, Dayton, Partnering with: YCCAC, YCSP	\$ 275,000.00
Lewiston	Lewiston	400-500 Students	Partnering with Community Concepts	169,882.70
MSAD70	Rural Aroostook	110 Students	Includes MSAD20, MSAD50, MSAD45, SAD1, RSU29 and Caribou	353,232.69
Portland	Portland	650 Students (400 HHs)	Partnering with QHC	759,670.43
RSU1	Bath/surrounding area	300 Students	MSAD75 (Bowdoin, Bowdoinham, Topsham, Harpswell), Brunswick and Richmond	442,214.18
TOTAL				\$ 2,000,000.00

TIMELINE:

This work is expected to start immediately. MaineHousing has developed contracts for these projects and normally sends payment to grantees within two weeks of receiving a signed contract.