

130th Maine Legislature
Joint Standing Committee on Health and Human Services
Testimony of Erik C. Jorgensen, MaineHousing, neither for nor against

LD 1305 An Act to Streamline Requests for Housing Assistance

12 April 2021

Senator Claxton, Representative Meyer and esteemed members of the Committee on Health and Human Services, my name is Erik Jorgensen, Director of Government Relations at the Maine State Housing Authority (MaineHousing).

MaineHousing has been helping Maine people own, rent, repair, and heat their homes since 1969. MaineHousing is an independent state authority 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.

I am testifying today neither for nor against LD 1305. This bill proposes to provide an option for the applicant to request housing assistance from Maine State Housing Authority when applying for aid programs at DHHS.

The idea of making it easy for Mainers to apply to one program while also learning about the availability of other support and assistance programs, creates a basic efficiency and is something that MaineHousing supports. We do feel, though, that the details of this proposed measure are not entirely clear. If, by “housing assistance,” the bill is referring to the 2021 federal emergency rental assistance programs, it would likely be a simple matter to direct applicants to the online rent assistance application page. If the bill refers to the Section 8 Housing Choice Voucher, it’s an entirely different process, but it too can be completed online. We do not, however, believe that these programs can be applied for within a DHHS application process, as they come from different federal agencies, have different income criteria, different ways of calculating income, and fundamentally different structures. For just one example, the emergency rental assistance program requires tenants and landlords to apply to the program together.

So while having DHHS applicants apply for MaineHousing programs through a DHHS website is problematic, simply creating links from one website to another makes abundant sense.

MaineHousing has recently linked its Home Energy Assistance Program (HEAP) to DHHS's "My Maine Connection" web portal. There, applicants can, as they learn about various Department programs, click on a link to get to MaineHousing's HEAP program application website. This is a useful tool to assure that people in need of support can readily learn what's available. We would similarly and enthusiastically support links like this for the emergency rent relief program and other COVID-19 support programs under the American Rescue Plan Act.

We know that "My Maine Connection" is being reconceived, and we are eager to continue working with the Department to assure that people seeking state support have a straightforward and well-marked path to follow toward finding available options and getting the assistance they need.

Thank you.