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*Testimony of Rep. Victoria Morales presenting*  
**LD 1305, An Act to Streamline Requests for Housing Assistance**

*Before the Joint Standing Committee on Health and Human Services*

Good morning Senator Claxton, Representative Meyer, and members of the Committee on Health and Human Services. My name is Victoria Morales and I represent South Portland in Housing District 33. I am here today to present **LD 1305, An Act to Streamline Requests for Housing Assistance**.

The housing need is greater than we have ever seen it. Pre-pandemic we were in a severe housing crisis with 19,000 households on the waiting list for Section 8 vouchers; today there are 25,000 households on the waitlist. That is a 27% increase in housing insecurity, which does not capture all facets of this housing crisis. I know you are aware of the depth of the crisis and are exploring various policy initiatives to solve it.

I also know you are well aware of the link between housing insecurity and homelessness and the needs of those families and children who access the programs of the Department of Health and Human Services, whether that be through:

1. The Office of Child and Family Services with child protective actions,
2. The Office of Family Independence and the receipt of TANF, SNAP, or the General Assistance emergency needs and rental assistance program,
3. The Office of Behavioral Health to provide services for those adults with mental illness and/or substance use disorder, including the BRAP and PATH rental assistance programs, or
4. The Office of MaineCare to receive health care.

The truth is that when we stably house folks in crisis, with behavioral health support, even those experiencing the worst crises, they get well. What that means in terms of performance

measurement for the State is that, because these individuals and families no longer need access to emergency and crisis-related services, the State saves money and improves lives at the same time. This is prevention.

Given the great housing need so many people are experiencing, given how burdensome and difficult it is to access available resources, and given the millions of federal dollars we will have to invest in housing in the next few years before we lose it (\$200 million from the CARES Act and \$350 million from the American Recovery Plan), we must work together to help the folks receiving the services of DHHS to access housing assistance.

That is what this bill does. Simply, when folks apply for TANF, SNAP, and MaineCare, let's also ask if they need housing assistance and either connect them to housing resources within DHHS or coordinate with MaineHousing to connect them to those resources. I understand DHHS has agreed to work with MaineHousing to include the need for heating assistance through MaineHousing's LIHEAP program. What I am proposing today is very similar. I understand there are concerns that the departments have, and I would be very happy to work with them before the work session.

This bill has a short-term urgency to make sure we are able to leverage all of the rental housing assistance we have and will receive from the federal government, and a long-term goal to create a process, potentially utilizing federal dollars, to streamline how we provide housing assistance so that it is not so burdensome and time consuming for all involved.

Thank you for the opportunity to present this important policy consideration.