

Senator Pierce, Representative Gere, and distinguished members of the Committee on Housing:

My name is Thea Spires. I'm a resident of Brunswick. My testimony is in support of LD 2.

During the Clinton Administration, I was a special assistant on disability issues and programs to the Secretary of HUD. Prior to that, I was the housing advocate at Disability Rights Maine for numerous years. My career in Fair Housing law began at the Maine Human Rights Commission where I developed educational materials regarding State and Federal Fair Housing law and conducted training seminars throughout Maine.

Many individuals who experience chronic homelessness have one or more disabilities as defined by State and Federal Fair Housing laws: Disability ["handicap"] means " a physical or mental impairment which substantially limits one or more major life activities... mental impairment includes... such diseases and conditions as...emotional illness, drug addiction (other than addiction caused by current, illegal use of a controlled substance) and alcoholism." (While an "addiction caused by current, illegal use of a controlled substance" alone does not qualify as a disability, usually individuals with such addictions have at least one other physical or mental impairment that is considered a Fair Housing disability.)

As required in LD 2, in order to qualify for the Housing First Program an unhoused person must have a "condition" (same term as used in Fair Housing law) that limits major life activities...such as substance use disorder or a behavioral health condition — i.e. a disability. If LD 2 is implemented as a site-based residential program, as are Maine's three current "Housing First" facilities, in my opinion, this clearly would constitute segregated, disability-only housing in violation of Fair Housing law.

Additionally, this site-based so-called "supportive housing" is the least desirable living environment for individuals with all types of disabilities. Supportive housing is designed and operated exclusively for the economic benefit and staffing convenience of the housing and service providers. People with disabilities want to live in integrated communities. And if we want services, we want them to be person-based — not housing-based so that we can be free to live where we choose, not segregated where the services are located.

Homelessness is a serious and life-threatening crisis for people with and without disabilities in Maine. Urgent action needs to be taken to provide housing — first, to all unhoused people in the State. LD 2 focuses on housing people with disabilities. This could be a good start, so I recommend the committee vote Ought to Pass LD 2 — provided this Housing First Program is not designed like the current Maine Housing First programs.

Thank you for the work that you do, and for the opportunity to testify. I'll be happy to try and answer any questions.