



Permanent Commission RACIAL, INDIGENOUS & TRIBAL POPULATIONS

LD 2158 “An Act to Improve the Housing Voucher System”

January 30, 2024

Senator Pierce, Representative Gere, and Honorable Members of the Joint Standing Committee on Housing.

My name is Rae Sage, and I am the Policy Coordinator for the Permanent Commission on the Status of Racial, Indigenous, and Tribal Populations. The Permanent Commission’s role is to examine racial disparities across all systems and advise Maine State Government on ways to improve the status and outcomes of historically disadvantaged racial, Indigenous, and tribal populations.

The Permanent Commission supports LD 2158 in its efforts to make housing more accessible to the state’s most vulnerable populations. To accommodate the state’s shifting economic landscape, our housing voucher system needs to be more dynamic in its ability to support Mainers.

Maine is in the midst of an affordable housing crisis, borne of our aging infrastructure, slow rate of development, and high levels of housing demand. The rising cost and limited availability of high-quality, affordable housing across the state has contributed to economic stagnation and a lack of critical services as doctors, care providers, and skilled tradespeople also cannot find housing. The burdens associated with this crisis do not fall evenly across the landscape either. Today, Black and Indigenous families are more likely than white Mainers to be living in unstable or unsafe housing conditions.

Housing is a place where it is easy to see the effects of compounding discrimination. For historically disadvantaged populations, income

disparities, geographic limitations, and cultural barriers, can make it extremely difficult to access affordable housing. Today, over 70% of the state's Black residents are renters, compared with only 25% of the state's white residents, making Maine 48th out of 50 states on a national housing equity index.¹ As these factors compound, we see racial disparities manifest not just in housing, but also in the state's unhoused populations. Since 2019, Maine experienced a more than 3-fold increase in homelessness², with roughly 47% of those experiencing homelessness from Black communities, despite making up only 1.6% of the state's population.³

Disparities in housing in turn have an impact on all other social determinants of health. Access to affordable, safe, and stable housing reduces exposure to transmissible disease⁴, increases long-term economic security⁵, and provides children and families an environment in which they can grow and flourish.⁶

Housing access is an urgent issue that needs an urgent and multi-dimensional response. Addressing our current affordable housing crisis requires investment by the state. This investment should include developing new affordable housing, and active political intervention to remedy long-standing social and economic inequities. Left unaddressed, these inequities will continue feeding disparities in housing by creating and maintaining the poverty cycles that disproportionately impact marginalized racial, Indigenous, and Tribal populations in the state. Thank you.

¹ https://www.americashealthrankings.org/explore/measures/homeownership_disparity/ME#

² The Maine Point in Time study changed its methodology in 2020 to include individuals living in transitional housing. The statistic offered here represents an approximation of the real increase in homelessness with those data removed from analysis.

³ MaineHousing. (2023). 2023 Point in Time Count. Available at: <https://rb.gy/xOfrf>

⁴ Ralli, M., et al. (2020). "Homeless persons and migrants in precarious housing conditions and COVID-19 pandemic: peculiarities and prevention strategies." *European Review for Medical and Pharmacological Sciences* 24.18; 9765-9767.

⁵ Di, Z.X. and Yang, Y. (2002). "Intergenerational Wealth Transfer and its Impact on Housing: A report of the Joint Center for Housing Studies, Harvard University. Available at: https://www.jchs.harvard.edu/sites/default/files/media/imp/di_w02-2.pdf

⁶ Fowler, P. J., & Farrell, A. F. (2017). Housing and child well being: implications for research, policy, and practice. *American Journal of Community Psychology*, 60(1-2), 3-8.