



15 State Road
Kittery, ME 03904
(207) 439-6376
FAX (207) 438-0294
www.fairtide.org

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In Favor of LD 473: Maine Rental Assistance and Voucher Guarantee Program

Senator Rafferty, Representative Sylvester, and honorable members of the Joint Standing Committee on Labor and Housing: my name is Emily Flinkstrom, I live in Kittery, Maine and I am testifying in favor of LD 473: Maine Rental Assistance and Voucher Guarantee Program.

I serve as the executive director of Fair Tide, a nonprofit with a mission to provide permanent housing and supportive services to people who are homeless in the very southern part of our state. I submit my testimony from the unique perspective of an agency that is successfully operating a program with similar features to those included in LD 473. There are two relevant points that I can share from our experience: 1) Rental vouchers are absolutely necessary for low-income households to be able to afford a place to live, especially in this current market and 2) landlord incentives, coupled with housing navigator services have increased our ability to secure housing for those who do have a rental voucher.

The housing situation in our region is alarming. The vacancy rate is at a historic low, rental rates are at an all-time high, and landlords have no shortage of potential tenants from which to choose. Households that are lucky enough to obtain a voucher, oftentimes after a painfully long wait, quickly realize that finding a place to utilize it is just as excruciating and sometimes downright impossible. The hope that comes with being awarded such a coveted resource is far too often squashed by the realization that there is nowhere to use it.

Fair Tide's Landlord Engagement Initiative was launched in October 2019 to address these roadblocks. The program offers a package of incentives to landlords who partner with us to rent to the folks we work with, primarily those with a rental voucher. Similar to this bill, our program includes (among other offerings) a risk mitigation fund and support from our housing navigator for both the tenant and the landlord. Prior to launching this program, we struggled to get landlords to the table in a meaningful way, but we now have 14 property owners representing 74 units who are interested in partnering. More concretely, we reached our initial goal to secure housing for five households and are in the process of raising the funds and awareness necessary to expand.

In our experience, offering tangible incentives such as a risk mitigation fund is critical in getting landlords to the table. Once there though, the relationships built with myself and our housing navigator provide them the reassurance they need to sign on the dotted line. The housing navigator position remains a key element to ensuring a successful placement for both the landlord and the tenant. One of our clients recently expressed her gratitude for the work of our housing navigator saying, "Kerry uplifts others, cares about their lives and finds life lasting resources for them. She is not just bringing people out of homelessness or keeping some of us from being homeless again, she is restoring a sense of self."



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I share this with you as a way to demonstrate that the strategies laid out in this bill offer a well thought out and proven approach to alleviating the housing crisis. Additional rental voucher resources will address the increasing number of households unable to afford the bloated rental market. At the same time, programs aimed at improving voucher utilization and ensuring a successful tenancy will assure those resources are not left on the table. Fair Tide is a relatively small agency and by the numbers, our success is similarly a small drop in the bucket. This bill has the potential to bring to scale the success we have seen with our limited resources and really make a difference for thousands of our fellow Mainers.

Thank you for your time in hearing my comments, and in considering this important bill.

With gratitude,

Emily Flinkstrom, MSW
Executive Director
executivedirector@fairtide.org