

Testimony of Debora Keller
to the Labor & Housing Committee

Regarding [LD 473 - An Act to Create the Maine Rental Assistance and Voucher Guarantee Program.](#)

March 3, 2021

I am the Executive Director of Bath Housing, an organization that works to enhance housing stability in greater Bath. Thank you for the opportunity to testify today in support of LD 473, *An Act to Create the Maine Rental Assistance and Voucher Guarantee Program.*

Bath Housing just last week released its housing vision and recommendations for a new set of strategies to meet the housing needs of area residents. The hope is that the vision will drive future efforts in the Midcoast region – efforts that may involve the creation of new housing, *but that do not stop there.* This legislation would result in the state-wide implementation of known strategies to address Maine’s housing needs.

Housing needs have outpaced available solutions. This is evident in the recent analysis, which showed that over 1,750 households in Bath struggled to pay for housing in 2019. This struggle has been compounded in 2020 in light of the COVID-19 pandemic, a robust national discussion of structural racism, and a struggling economy.

Bath Housing’s vision for our community is that:

- We are a vibrant, resilient and inclusive community. Everyone who works here, grew up here, wants to stay here or wants to come here has a reasonable opportunity to live here.
- Local policies support diverse housing opportunities: A range of housing options meets the varied and changing needs of an economically and increasingly racially diverse population including current residents and newcomers alike. And that the community will engage in an examination and analysis of existing and potential regulations to ensure compatibility with the stated housing goals.
- Finally, that housing efforts in the region will be approached collaboratively, with regional partners including neighboring communities, non-profits and for-profit developers.

This bill sets up statewide replication of proven strategies that have been implemented in Maine and are ready for wide-spread implementation.

Rental Voucher Guarantee/Landlord Incentives: Bath Housing, as well as at least four other housing authorities in Maine, recently piloted successful landlord incentive programs. In our case, we offered a \$750 cash bonus to landlords who signed a new lease with a voucher holder. MaineHousing has for several years offered a series of incentives for landlords, including damage mitigation and repair funds. These incentives work – we have brought several new

landlords into our mix through the program. And we need more -- Bath Housing has seen a 30% decrease in the number of landlords we work with through the voucher program. This is due to a decrease in "mom & pop" landlords and an increase in investors. We have work to do as a state to create a set of consistent, proven, and effective incentives to ensure that we have landlords to accept housing vouchers. There is nothing more defeating than having a family turn back their voucher because they could not find an apartment. We need more landlords supporting this program.

Housing Navigation: Bath Housing has been offering basic housing navigation services for seven years. Our housing navigator fields an average of 20 calls each month and assists families with the housing search process. Not only does this service get people on the appropriate waiting lists, but it provides a support net for those who are struggling and do not know where to turn for help. We focus on helping set people up for long-term housing stability. Housing navigation works and this bill would set up a statewide network of navigators that understand the complex world of housing subsidies and vast, confusing network of housing options.

We know - through both significant amounts of data AND through the day-to-day work we do - that stable housing promotes positive outcomes in education, employment, physical and mental health, and financial stability. Any investment in housing is an investment in our civic and economic well-being and an investment in the citizens of Maine.