



Preble Street

Turning Hunger and Homelessness into Opportunity and Hope

Regarding: LD 473 – An Act to Create the Maine Rental Assistance and Voucher Guarantee Program.

Florence House

Huston Commons

Logan Place

Anti-Trafficking Services

Veterans Housing Services

Rapid ReHousing

Food Programs

Teen Center

Joe Kreisler Teen Shelter

First Place

Street Outreach Collaborative

Advocacy

Maine Hunger Initiative

Health Services

MMC-Preble Street

Learning Collaborative

March 3, 2021

Good morning Senator Rafferty, Representative Sylvester and honorable members of the Committee on Labor and Housing.

My name is Julie Kselman and I am the Director of Anti-Trafficking Services at Preble Street. I am testifying today on behalf of Preble Street and the hundreds of individuals we work with every day, to voice our strong support of LD 473, which would increase access to affordable housing for many across the state, including many Preble Street clients.

At Preble Street, we have witnessed firsthand how the lack of housing supports in Maine has impacted clients across our agency.

For clients in our Anti-Trafficking Services, stable housing is of paramount importance. Victims of human trafficking in Maine experience housing instability at extremely high rates. Of the nearly 260 victims of trafficking served by Preble Street since 2014, 89% report some form of housing instability at intake. For one such client, staying in a “homeless shelter” was not an option. The person who had forced her into sex-trafficking was staying at the same location, and her life and livelihood were threatened by his presence. As a victim of trafficking with a criminal history, she had a hard time finding a landlord willing to rent her an apartment. She spent months in unsafe living conditions and on the streets, waiting for a safe housing opportunity. Services proposed by this bill would have made a significant difference in her life – instead of experiencing more trauma in homelessness, she would have had safety and healing in a home.

This bill would help change the lives of young adults at our Teen Services, all of whom experience homelessness or unstable housing. These young people are not afforded housing opportunities due to lack of social supports and resources that many others may have, including stable and sufficient income or a cosigner to ensure rent. While there are currently some vouchers in place that are able to support young people we serve, there is still a large number of youth who don’t qualify due to criminal history or immigration status.

Just this morning, I sat at breakfast at our Teen Shelter with young people that had fled atrocities in their war-torn countries only to come here on their own without any familial or social connection. These unaccompanied immigrant youth rely on General Assistance for housing due to their inability to work and engagement in education programs.

This important legislation would provide the tools for Navigators and Landlords to successfully house these young people, ensuring a new and deserved start in their lives.

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With stable housing, they can complete their education goals, and eventually find gainful employment while establishing a safe and supportive community here in Maine.

It is important to highlight two other points of note. First, there are thousands of low-income Mainers that are not able to access “mainstream” housing resources for people experiencing homelessness, such as Shelter Plus Care or Section 8 vouchers. For these vouchers, there are often eligibility requirements, such as mental health or physical health diagnoses, or households must be at or under certain income threshold. For vouchers with broader eligibility requirements, such as Section 8, there are often years long waiting lists, making this resource largely inaccessible as well.

Due to this, there is a whole portion of unhoused Mainers, many of whom work and are employed, without access to the appropriate resources to resolve their homeless crisis. We see them in our shelters and accessing our emergency Food Programs.

With the passage of this bill, much needed services would be expanded to this portion of people experiencing homelessness so that they do not stay homeless. Addressing and serving this portion of Maine’s unhoused people is a vital part of addressing and ending homelessness in Maine. Research shows that if people are given the resources when they need them, they are more likely to exit homelessness quickly and not return to homelessness.

Second, even when a household is able to obtain a voucher, it is not always the solution to their housing crisis. Even for clients who have a voucher and a housing navigator to help them with the process, it can be a long road to securing a safe and affordable apartment. Many landlords do criminal background checks, credit checks and rental history checks when screening potential tenants, which can be a huge barrier to many people experiencing homelessness. Even with the help of housing navigators, this barrier to housing is not easily overcome.

Time and time again, we at Preble Street have seen that a person’s history – whether that include a low credit score, incarceration, or a previous eviction – does not always predict whether or not someone will be a good tenant. In fact, if those barriers are lifted and a person is given the chance to move in with the help and support of a housing navigator, they are likely to be successful in their housing placement.

This can be illustrated by a client, Mike, that Preble Street recently served. Mike is a man in his 50s who had been homeless on and off for the past two years; he began working with a Preble Street caseworker early last fall. He was flexible with where he wanted to live and was able to obtain a Shelter Plus Care voucher. However, due to a criminal charge from 2017, Mike was turned down by several landlords after applying for vacant units. Mike only had this one criminal charge and had not been in any trouble since. It was the assessment of the Preble Street caseworker that Mike would be a good tenant, and that his one charge from 2017 did not paint a picture of what kind of tenant he would be. Thankfully, after going on several showings, Mike and his caseworker were able to find a landlord that was willing to give him a chance. Since moving into his new home in the first week of January, Mike has paid his rent faithfully and has made friends with his neighbors. However, he languished in homelessness for years because his criminal background prevented him from obtaining a unit.

Across the agency Preble Street serves those who have experienced chronic homelessness, veterans, immigrants, those with chronic health conditions and people struggling with mental illness or the disease of addiction. Many of these characteristics make landlords reluctant to rent to them, as in the examples provided above. This forces them into the margins, putting a safe home even further out of reach.

Over the past year, Preble Street experienced the loss of dozens of clients we had worked with, some of whom had been living on the streets in Portland for months – or longer. Deaths among those experiencing homelessness in Portland rose 60% in 2020. We testify on behalf of each and every one of those individuals, who's lives might have been saved by having a warm, safe, stable home.

For all these reasons and more, we strongly encourage the members of this committee to vote in favor of a LD 473 and increase access to stable housing for thousands of Mainers.

We thank you very much for your time and consideration.