

**Testimony of Andrea Mancuso
In Support of LD 473
“An Act to Create the Maine Rental Assistance and Voucher Guarantee Program”
Before the Joint Standing Committee on Labor and Housing
Wednesday, March 3, 2021**

Senator Rafferty, Representative Sylvester, and members of the Joint Standing Committee on Labor and Housing, I am writing on behalf of the Maine Coalition to End Domestic Violence (MCEDV) in Support of LD 473, “An Act to Create the Maine Rental Assistance and Voucher Guarantee Program.”

MCEDV serves a membership of the eight regional domestic violence resource centers (DVRs) across the state, as well as the Immigrant Resource Center of Maine. Our programs together operate a network of 11 emergency shelters throughout Maine. In 2020, these programs provided shelter to 612 people, including 245 children - every one of them having experienced some form of acute or chronic trauma. Additionally, these DVRs provide information and advocacy services to thousands of survivors who do not come into shelter but who need help achieving safe and stable housing.

Creating incentives for more landlords to accept rental assistance programs and to take a chance on a housing candidate with a less than stellar history can only help to create more opportunities for safe and stable housing for survivors of domestic abuse and violence and their children across Maine. Survivors often present with income, credit and rental histories that are poor and that are directly linked to the abusive choices made by a former partner. With respect to credit history, 57% of survivors in Maine report that the person who abused them incurred debt in their name and 72% report that the person who abused them lied about paying the bills, which will often include payment of utilities that were in the survivor’s name. A full 62% of survivors indicated that the person who abused them also interfered with their ability to maintain employment.¹ Additionally, many survivors experience a former landlord refusing to provide a positive reference as a result of: an early terminated lease; damage to the apartment caused by the person who abused them; law enforcement being called to the apartment multiple times; or just the fact that the landlord was friendlier than the person who abused them. While our statutes protect survivors from being evicted for many of these reasons, survivors often need to relocate, either for safety

¹ See “A Report on the Impact of Economic Abuse on Survivors of Domestic Violence in Maine,” presented to the Maine Joint Standing Committee on Judiciary (February 7, 2019). Accessible at: <https://bit.ly/2Djs9f4>.

reasons or due to economic realities, and, in practice, given the broad discretion afforded to landlords, there is little a survivor can do to guard against future rental discrimination.

We also encourage you to recognize the utility of expanding access to housing navigators. Each of the eight DVRCs in Maine also has on staff a full-time advocate providing housing navigation services to survivors in their communities. We have found that these advocates are invaluable resources for our communities that contribute to the ability to help survivors become safely and stably housed. These advocates are keyed into the availability of apartments or rental houses in their communities. They have community-based knowledge of where extra money for things like security deposits and utility payments might be found and relationships with those community partners. They also frequently work with each other, as well as navigators at other organizations, when survivors need to be connected to another community. They also work constantly to develop relationships with local landlords that can help smooth things over when/if tensions arise and can help survivors with a broad array of services to set them up for rental success: correcting or “justifying” poor rental histories, budgeting, apartment hunting, helping to get utilities set up. Additionally, in our network, these are experienced advocates who have training in providing trauma informed services. Increasing the pool of available housing navigators in our state can only help more of our families who are homeless and housing-insecure achieve safe and stable housing, and they are needed. In Washington County, the housing navigator at the Next Step Domestic Violence Project is the only housing navigator who is available on a full-time basis.

In 2020, length of stay in our shelters was up by 13%. While finding safe, affordable and permanent housing has always been challenging, particularly in Maine’s rural communities, the COVID-19 pandemic has created obstacles that are even more complex. There could not be a better time for our state to make a concentrated investment in both increasing the pool of available housing to Mainers who are homeless or who have unsafe or unstable housing and in increasing the available resources at organizations across the state to help connect Mainers to this housing and the additional supports that have been demonstrated to help achieve and maintain housing.

Thank you for the opportunity to be heard. MCEDV and our member programs are happy to serve as a resource to the Committee as you continue to discuss this issue.

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