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Lewiston

Dear Committee on Labor and Housing,

I submit this testimony in support of LD 473, An Act to Create the Maine Rental Assistance and Voucher Guarantee Program.

I am the manager of a small housing organization called the Raise-Op Housing Cooperative, home to 50 low-income residents who own and manage the organization together. We serve residents of incomes below 30% AMI, and up to 80% AMI. I also currently chair Lewiston's Housing Committee, and I'm part of a coalition called Housing Justice Maine, which prioritizes the voices and experiences of low-income tenants in housing advocacy.

Of all the state housing bills currently under consideration, I believe this bill will provide the greatest immediate and long term relief to tenants who are currently rent-burdened, homeless, or facing homelessness, and to property owners who cannot collect the income they need to manage their buildings safely. This voucher guarantee program will also fill the enormous gap we have between who is income-eligible for assistance and who actually receives the help they need. It will support households that cannot access federal programs like Section 8 Housing Choice Voucher (HCV), and it will bring better oversight and consistency to housing assistance statewide.

Only 1/4 of eligible households receive the housing assistance that they need. We have a waitlist statewide of over 20,000 applicants. Beyond that, many people don't apply, either because they are discouraged by the long wait time, or they are not eligible due to their immigration status. I have seen many people struggle to get by and pay rent on time if at all. The fact that some people have assistance while others do not also creates a new problem for the role of affordable housing development. New affordable housing is good for the people who receive it, but also creates a paradox in the private market in that new development also contributes to rising property values, increased rents, and can simultaneously create housing unaffordability for neighbors who don't have rental assistance. In order to address this problem, we must make sure housing assistance is available for everyone who needs it as conditions in the private market change.

As far as assistance programs go, the existing Housing Choice Voucher program works really well with the private market. The voucher usually keeps up with fair market value and it pays consistently and on time, the administrators are communicative, and the inspections are frequent to ensure good property condition. The HCV provides predictable income for property owners, who can then work more easily and comfortably with tenants who would otherwise be at risk of nonpayment of rent. The problem is that the US Congress doesn't fund the program sufficiently, and some federal restrictions limit access. I see first hand many people living hand to mouth, paying everything they have to live in unsafe housing, where relationships with landlords can be contentious or exploitative. The effects on these families are crippling, impacting their health, their ability to save money to improve their lives, and their sense of agency. All of these families are low-income, and most often people of color.

The disposition of landlords can range widely, from those who want to do the right thing for their tenants, and those who are only concerned about money and will evict without hesitating for late rent. No matter their intention, they all need to collect a reasonable amount of income to operate their properties. The math shows that poor and working people's incomes in Maine cannot pay for decent housing. The average wage required to afford a one-bedroom apartment in Maine was \$15.64/hr in 2020. The average wages for many essential workers - nursing assistants, cooks, retail salespeople, cashiers, laborers, stockers, janitors, home health workers and fast food workers - all fell below \$15.64. These are people who are forced to choose between paying rent over school tuition, medical bills, car repair, and food. Just because some people pay rent on time, this does not mean it comes without major sacrifice. And for those who do not pay rent on time, eviction can be a permanently damaging event, often leading to unsafe shelter, exploitative relationships, addiction, and even death. Many victims of domestic abuse, for example, will choose living with an abusive partner rather than seeking out independent housing due to unaffordability. Others will become unhoused after an eviction and could freeze to death in the winter time or contract COVID or other illness on the street or in an overcrowded shelter. A reliable and fully funded

voucher program can greatly reduce evictions and the rate of people who are unhoused, and at a much lower cost to the public than supporting people after they lose their housing through emergency room visits and first responder services.

Without the payment of fair market rent, even well-meaning landlords could have to defer maintenance or reduce service, leading to buildings that diminish in quality over time. Considering over 65% of the rental units in Maine were built before 1980, this deferred maintenance can lead to lead exposure, leaking roofs, mold problems, failing electricity, or failing heat systems. With reliable and sufficient income through a housing voucher, landlords can pay to manage their properties and pay for repairs. LD 473 also includes navigators and a \$2,000 guarantee against damage and last month's rent. That's a great incentive to encourage landlords to participate. This reliable source of income can also be a boost to the housing market in general, as developers can rely on clients with stronger ability to pay the rent required to afford the real cost of the housing.

It will take a decade or more of increased development to build all of the affordable housing that we need. And while new construction is part of the solution - especially with regards to comfort and safety - we can make our existing housing affordable today by enacting LD 473.

Housing is a human right, and COVID has helped to illuminate the fact that housing is also healthcare. It is in the interest of our public health, and economic health, that our workers, our vets, our elderly, our children, remain safely and reliably housed at all times, through pandemics and economic booms alike.