

Robyn Stanicki
Belfast

Dear Esteemed members of the Committee on Labor and Housing

I'm Robyn Stanicki from Belfast, and I am a researcher, policy advocate, and community planner. I would like to support this legislation brought forward by Representative Morales and I speak to the ineffectiveness of the housing voucher program at present. This bill seeks to address the inadequacy of, and barriers to using the current rental assistance program. I was swallowed by poverty as a homeless teenager. As a young adult I lived in many types of situations and many of them were unsafe. Years later I got a voucher and for 5 years I got a break on rent.

If you are simply poor, with no other exceptions, you may wait up to four years for this security. The voucher program has a reputation of being cumbersome and arduous for many. According to a recent housing study a large portion of low-income Mainers are cost-burdened and they struggle to pay for housing. With a roof, they forgo some other critical needs. The struggle does not end with a voucher in hand. To find a qualified unit, one needs to seek a nicer than average apartment and convince the owner to accept less than the average rent. Counting on the goodwill or finances of property owners is no model. It is a gatekeeper. A voucher has no value if you cannot use it. If you do find one, you need to avoid using the words "voucher," "assistance", or "section 8" to get in the door. "Stipend" or "allowance" work well until you've convinced the owner that you're an excellent tenant and they might be willing to work with you. Now you need First, Last, Security, Credit Check, and a call to your boss. Even after all this, you have no guarantee of a lease until the landlord agrees to the inspection and repairs.

I was incredibly lucky, and I was able to maintain my voucher. I was able to keep my kids in the same school and went to college. I still struggled, but not as much. I left the program to take a job exceeding the \$60,000 threshold. This legislation gives more Mainers the opportunity to turn that security into something more, for someone else to achieve their goals. Thank you.

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