

Martha Stein
Hope Acts

Testimony in Support of LD 473 – An Act to Create the Maine Rental Assistance and Voucher Guarantee Program

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Submitted by Martha Stein, Executive Director Hope Acts

Good morning to the members of the Labor and Housing Committee,

My name is Martha Stein, I am the Executive Director of Hope Acts, a non-profit organization in Portland that provides housing and support services for new asylum seekers who have recently arrived in Maine, most of whom start their lives in our community at the city's homeless shelter. I am offering testimony in support of LD 473 – An Act to Create the Maine Rental Assistance and Voucher Guarantee Program.

Hope Acts is both a landlord--housing 13 asylum seekers in our apartment building, Hope House--and a service provider that works to help asylum seekers meet their basic needs through our Asylum Seeker Assistance Program (ASAP). In 2020, nearly half of our ASAP clients came to us looking for assistance finding a decent place to live, or with a problem related to their current housing.

I have the privilege of working with Representative Morales through the nonprofit she founded and leads, the Quality Housing Coalition, which includes the successful Project Home, an initiative that provides incentives to landlords to work with housing programs like Hope Acts so that people who would otherwise be excluded from consideration, are given an opportunity to move to safe and good quality housing. LD 473 provides a win-win for landlords and prospective renters by removing barriers and providing assurances to landlords. It addresses gaps in federal programs and provides the means to provide vouchers and housing navigators so the thousands of Mainers needing affordable housing will have opportunities to access housing and then have the support so they can maintain their home.

We recently worked with a family of a mom, dad, two toddlers, and an infant. They came to Hope Acts because their landlord refused to remediate a mold problem caused by a leak. The parents were so worried about their children's health, that they closed off two of the three bedrooms. While the dad has a full-time job, the vast majority of their income was going to pay rent. The family felt trapped: they did not have the means to search for another apartment, nor did they have funds for another security deposit, 1st, and last month rent, etc. And with only a year of rent history, and limited English, they could not address their situation on their own. After several unsuccessful attempts to work with the landlord, we finally were able to find a safe and clean apartment nearby through Project Home. The family is doing well. We check in regularly, and they know that help is just a phone call away.

While I am working with asylum seekers at Hope Acts, I want to be clear that I believe everyone in our state should have access to affordable, safe housing. I previously worked at Tedford Housing in Brunswick. While clients and shelter guests accessing Tedford's services had different challenges than the people I work with today, the need was the same: a safe and affordable place to live. It is simply impossible for families and individuals to move their lives forward if they are couch surfing, staying in a shelter, or are otherwise homeless.

Thank you for your time and your support of LD 473.

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