



STATE OF MAINE
HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES
SPEAKER'S OFFICE
AUGUSTA, MAINE 04333-0002
(207) 287-1300

RYAN M. FECTEAU
SPEAKER OF THE HOUSE

Testimony of Speaker Ryan Fecteau
In Support of L.D. 1464
“An Act to Improve Accessibility of Affordable Housing Data”
Monday, April 26, 2021

Senator Hickman, Representative Sylvester, honorable members of the Joint Standing Committee on Labor and Housing, I am Ryan Fecteau and I represent part of my hometown of Biddeford. I also have the distinct honor of serving as the Speaker of the Maine House. I'm here today to present L.D. 1464, *An Act to Improve Accessibility of Affordable Housing Data*. This bill is about increasing transparency and availability of data in order to help solve the affordable housing challenges we face in Maine.

As legislators, we all know that data is key to understanding problems and thinking through solutions to those problems. The Labor and Housing Committee has heard a large number of bills aimed at addressing Maine's stark affordable housing challenges, an issue I have prioritized in my work as a lawmaker.

This bill was put forward to improve upon the data that we can draw from to inform our decision-making on affordable housing policy, in two key ways.

We have all heard from constituents, advocates and state officials that an increasing number of housing voucher recipients are turning their vouchers back in because they are unable to use them to rent an apartment. That is troubling and highly problematic. But we don't have any data to explain *why* they are turning their vouchers back in.

Is it because they simply couldn't find an apartment below the payment limit set by the local housing authority that issued the voucher? Or is it because they were being discriminated against as a voucher holder? Or is it because the apartments they did find failed to pass minimum housing quality standards? Or is it because they were rejected based on credit issues, eviction history, or previous involvement with the justice system? Or is it because their circumstances changed and they didn't need the voucher anymore? Or was there some other reason?

We don't have these answers because housing authorities are not obligated to ask people this question when they return their unused vouchers. This bill requires that this information be collected and provided annually to the Legislature so that we can better understand what, if anything, we can do to help address the problem.

As members of the Committee are no doubt aware, Maine has received a very large investment of federal dollars to provide relief to tenants whose ability to pay their rent has been negatively impacted by the pandemic. That relief is also highly valuable to landlords who have their own bills to pay. Getting that money processed and out the door is a difficult task because the demand is so high, and

because there are many federal rules and guidelines to be followed. But many of you may be getting outreach from constituents like I am – people who are frustrated that it is taking 4, 5, 6 weeks or more for their rent relief applications to get processed, while their landlord is making it clear that they can't wait forever. These renters are anxious and scared and so are their landlords.

No one is looking to scapegoat the organizations that are working so hard to process rent relief applications. However, we cannot help to fix this problem without knowing more about how long applications are taking to process and, more importantly, why they are taking that long. This bill would require that key data points be provided to this committee on a monthly basis to help you – and all of us as concerned citizens – understand what is happening on the ground and what barriers our community partners are encountering that are keeping them from quickly delivering the help that tenants and landlords need. Once we have that information, we will be in a better position to assess whether there is action we can take to address these problems.

Like all of you, I am deeply concerned about our state's affordable housing crisis and committed to finding solutions wherever possible. This bill would provide us with critical data and information to help guide our housing policy initiatives, and I hope you will join me in supporting L.D. 1464 with a "Ought to Pass" vote.