

130th Maine Legislature, First Session
Joint Standing Committee on Labor and Housing

Testimony in Opposition to

LD 1464: An Act to Improve Accessibility of Affordable Housing Data.

Senator Hickman, Representative Sylvester, members of the Joint Standing Committee on Labor and Housing, my name is Erik Jorgensen, Director of Government Relations at the Maine State Housing Authority (MaineHousing).

MaineHousing has been helping Maine people own, rent, repair, and heat their homes since 1969. MaineHousing is an independent state authority created to address the problems of unsafe, unsuitable, overcrowded, and unaffordable housing. We are authorized to issue bonds to finance single family mortgages for first-time homebuyers and for affordable multi-family housing.

We are also authorized to administer a number of state and federal programs including rental subsidies, weatherization, fuel assistance, two housing block grants, the low-income housing tax credit program, and homeless grant programs. We receive state general fund revenue for homeless programs and receive a dedicated portion of the real estate transfer tax for the Housing Opportunities for Maine (HOME) Fund.

MaineHousing certainly recognizes the value of good data as a means to inform any programming or policy decision. This bill, though well-intentioned, asks for both annual *and* monthly reports to the legislature, with no sunset date, based mostly on information that is currently available on public websites. The bill also specifies reporting additional information that has been proven to be extremely difficult, if not impossible, to get. This bill would require MaineHousing to file 13 separate reports with the legislature every year.

PART 1 would require Maine State Housing Authority to report annually on tenant-based “section eight” housing vouchers, issued by either MaineHousing itself or by any of the 24 other housing authorities in the state. In addition to reporting on the levels of uptake, the report would require documentation of instances in which vouchers were returned unused.

Information on vouchers in use across the state is publicly available on the HUD website.¹ The first page of data for Maine shows that the state is at 101% of its allotted budget utilization. In other words, all the money that comes to Maine to pay for vouchers is in use. Actual voucher

¹ For a community by community state breakdown of voucher utilization and budgets, visit this web page and click on the filter to show results for “Maine”.

<https://app.powerbigov.us/view?r=eyJrIjojM2Y2OTQ2MTAtODVhNC00YmM2LTlhOWEtZWY4MGU5YWVmZDFmIiwidCI6IjYxNTUyNGM1LTlyZTktNGJjZC1hODkzLTExODBhNTNmYzdiMjI9>

utilization is shown as well, and this varies widely by community. In many parts of Maine it is, as you all know, it is difficult to use a voucher, as supply of available units is too low.

The bill also requires MaineHousing to report on the reasons why vouchers are turned back unused. While this sounds like a straightforward question, a 2020 study by Maine's public Housing Authorities on voucher turnback looked at a sample of 60 households from around the state who did not use their vouchers. 20 (or about 1/3 of them) lost contact with the housing authority and could not be contacted at all at the end of their voucher period. 9 could not find an apartment willing to rent to section 8; 9 found other housing without needing a voucher; 6 could not find an apartment within payment standards and 3 ran into trouble around credit or criminal history.

This information, for this sample of 60 turnbacks, was not easily collected. Vouchers are not physically returned – they can be renewed but eventually if not matched with a lease, they simply expire. It would require significant staff time at every housing authority to try and determine why a specific voucher went unused. Though this was a sample of 60, it was drawn from around the state and we have no reason to think that these are not the general reasons why vouchers are turned back.

PART 2 of the Bill asks for MaineHousing to provide monthly reports to the legislature on the Federal Emergency Rental relief program. Most of the information requested in these reports is currently available on a public dashboard on the MaineHousing website. This information is updated weekly and is available for any legislator or member of the public to view.²

This is a program that is delivered across Maine, not by MaineHousing but by the state's Community Action Agencies. Each application requires staff contact between the CAA and both the tenant and the landlord to meet the federal regulations. It's a complicated program that pays for both rental arrearages, prospective rent and overdue utility bills. To date more than 17,000 people have contacted the program; 13,000 have applied; 7527 applications are in process; 3,000 have been resolved (either paid, approved for payment or withdrawn or declined); and just over 2000 are incomplete and awaiting more information.

This information is updated and posted on a weekly basis.

As for throughput, some of the CAA's are 100% caught up, while others still are working through a considerable backlog. MaineHousing monitors this closely - meeting with the CAA's weekly. Getting this money to the people who need it has been our top organizational priority this year.

In summary, we feel that the reporting requirements, specifying 13 reports to the legislature per year at least while we are engaged with Federal rental relief funds, represent a very serious administrative burden during a time when our agency is stretched to respond to the demands of the work at hand. We would be happy to meet with this committee anytime, to report on section 8 and/or the Emergency Rent Relief program or anything else. We would be happy to include

² The Federal Rent Relief Program information can be found here:
<https://www.mainehousing.org/policy-research/program-data>

this information in our regular reports to this committee. But mandated monthly reporting, especially when most of the information is already publicly available, is something that would be very difficult for us to comply with.