



130th Maine Legislature
Joint Standing Committee on Labor and Housing

Testimony of Christopher J. LaRoche, Westbrook Housing Authority in Opposition to

LD 1464 An Act to Improve Accessibility of Affordable Housing Data

26 April 2021

Senator Rafferty, Representative Sylvester, members of the Joint Standing Committee on labor and Housing, my name is Christopher LaRoche, Executive Director of the Housing Authority of the City of Westbrook (Westbrook Housing).

Westbrook Housing Authority is a municipal Public Housing Authority servicing the community of Westbrook and those communities in its shared jurisdiction within 10 miles as defined by M.R.S Title 30-A. Established in 1969, Westbrook Housing issues and manages 1011 HUD Housing Choice Vouchers and owns and manages 618 affordable housing apartments. Behind Maine Housing and Portland Housing Authority, Westbrook Housing Authority is the third largest HUD Housing Choice Voucher Program (HCV) in the state of Maine. Since 2014, Westbrook Housing Authority has maintained an HCV utilization rate, (vouchers issued and leased up) of 99.27% with the year of 2014 being our lowest utilization rate of 98.5% and the year of 2020 being our highest of 99.953%.

I am testifying today in **opposition** to LD 1464. The bill that is before the Committee poses an undue burden on the 20 municipal Housing Authorities across the state. Information on the Housing Choice Voucher utilization rate is readily available to the public and consists of real-time data. The two data sources identify the HCV utilization for all Maine Housing Authorities including Maine State Housing Authority, and access to each Housing Authority’s voucher utilization data. The first being the Housing Choice Voucher Data Dashboard:

[Housing Choice Voucher \(HCV\) Data Dashboard | HUD.gov / U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development \(HUD\)](#)

And the second being the Housing Choice Voucher Two Year Tool:

[PIH - Housing Choice Vouchers: Tools | HUD.gov / U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development \(HUD\)](#)

The bill that is before the Committee today identifies a requirement for each Housing Authority to track the reasons why a recipient has not leased up. I testify that this is an undue burden on Housing Authorities. In 2013 Housing Authorities were underfunded by Congress at a 38-year low. Since 2013 Housing Authorities HCV program have been prorated and underfunded in each year since. Since 2013, all Housing Authorities HCV administration budgets have been prorated at or below 80% of full funding. Most Housing Authorities lack the funds to fully staff the HCV departments to meet the ongoing issuance of Vouchers, much less address the current demands to continually re-certify households to meet rent payment requirements because of job reduction or job loss. To add another layer of monitoring and mandatory reporting when understaffed and overburdened Housing Authorities are struggling to maintain production levels is an undue burden.

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Without state funding to provide social workers as Housing Navigators this bill is premature as Housing Authorities lack capacity to meet the obligations of such a bill. In 2020 the municipal Housing Authorities and Maine Housing participated in a PILOT study to obtain information related to why HCV holders could not lease up and they turned in their vouchers. The Westbrook Housing HCV Director identified that the time spent in attempting to contact the voucher holders was overly laborious with nominal feedback with a response rate was nominal because the voucher recipients did not respond. Our experience mirrors the result of the nominal feedback from the study. I have provided the summary report dated July of 2020 from the PILOT outreach effort to collect data. I do believe that the current study identifies that the data collection methods reveal a nominal result for the effort needed across the spectrum of participating Housing Authorities. This is not much different from the 15% success rate of respondents when drawing down from the combined wait list. In the end, the data collected identifies what we all know, that the most common reason for underutilized vouchers is the lack of affordable units and voucher holders giving up on looking because of the lack of housing availability. The other issue that is not addressed in this data report is that most Housing Authorities do not have enough budget authority to lease up their vouchers allotted in their HUD Annual Contributions Contract as identified in 2019 with 102.25% and 2020 with 101.36% of Budget Authority expended with 14.4% increase in statewide average of per unit monthly HAP payment from 12/31/17 through 12/31/20.

The HUD Data Dashboard identifies that all Maine Housing Authorities with a combined total of 13,219 vouchers have an HCV success rate of 89.05% which is better than the national average of 88.32%. The three primary reasons for the lower HCV utilization rate in Maine include the following: 1. Maine Housing Authorities in total spend 101.36% of their annual HUD funding to house 89.05% of the vouchers that they receive. Most Housing Authorities cannot afford to lease 100% of the vouchers; 2. The second problem is that there is a statewide lack of rental inventory. This is not a new problem, and it is a problem we have been struggling with since 1987; 3. Many HCV voucher recipients do not follow through with the Housing Authority and just do not respond. There is a need for Social Workers who are Housing Navigators, but Housing Authorities do not have the funds to hire such staff as we are under funded and understaffed to run the program as designed.

I do believe that data collection is important and the ability to collect data was a key component of the development of the HCV statewide Combined Wait List paid for and developed by Westbrook, South Portland, and Portland Housing Authorities. But this bill introduces a premature mandate that Housing Authorities lack that capacity to respond to.

It is my perspective that one result of such a study would be to use the data to force the legislature to impose upon Maine Housing to Project Base more of its vouchers. The public already has the mechanism to do so without legislation by responding to the Housing Authorities' Annual Plan public input during the Public Hearing process or directly to the Board of Commissioners. This public input is the information that the Housing Authority Board of Commissioners can respond to make that decision.

In Summary, Housing Choice Voucher data is already accessible by the public for viewing and study. And existing data reveals what is already known and has been an historical affordable housing issue since 1987 – that there is not enough inventory so landlords can get a higher rent than what is allowed by the HUD HCV program causing lower voucher utilization.

Thank you.

Section 8 Voucher Turnback Project – Initial Results and Observations

INTRODUCTION:

This initial report is based on turnback data collected through March 25, 2020 for 74 households. Some patterns do emerge that might help Maine housing authorities think about program design. However, it is important to note two things: (1) that the data's real value may come from comparing turnback's to the entire voucher holding population in Maine; and (2) Covid-19 has surely impacted voucher lease up. For example, Covid-19 may have impacted voucher lease up by:

- Making it harder for voucher holders to search for apartments – with case management working remotely and showings being remote; or
- Making it easier because vouchers are a stable source of income in a declining economy.

Overall, continuing to track voucher turnback during Covid-19 and beyond could be crucially important to better understand the rental landscape for Section 8 holders and adapt housing authority practices to improve lease up. With this introduction here's some of the results:

INITIAL KEY RESULTS:

Regional Response:

Data was collected from the following housing authorities Augusta, Bangor, Brunswick, Caribou, Ellsworth/MDI, Lewiston, Maine Housing, Portland, Sanford, Waterville, Westbrook. With more comprehensive reporting, regional trends may immerge that are worth considering.

Reasons for Lapse: Of the 60 households reporting, the top 5 reasons for turnback were:¹

1. Unknown – Recipient Lost Contact or Disappeared (22 Households)
2. Unable to Find Apartment willing to rent to Section 8 (Generally) (9 Households)
3. Found Alternative Housing without the voucher (9 Households)
4. Unable to find apartment within payment standards (6 Households)
5. Unable to find apartment due to tenant history (criminal or credit history) (3 Households)

Voucher Administration Trends:

- **Extensions Requested:** 40 Households requested extensions; 30 households did not request extensions.
- **Landlord Packets:** 13 households submitted landlord packets.
- **New versus Existing Vouchers:** 60 households were new voucher recipients, 13 households were existing voucher recipients
- **Voucher Type:** The vast majority of vouchers turned back were HCV's. Only 1 voucher was a HUD VASH voucher and 4 were Section 811 vouchers.

¹ 14 Households did not have the reason for lapse reported.

HOUSEHOLD CHARACTERISTICS:

Voucher and Household Size:

- 1 person households (38)
- 2 person households (21)
- 3 person households (4)
- 4 person households (6)
- 5 person households (4)

AMI:

- 0-15% AMI: 20 Households
- 16-30% AMI: 34 Households
- 31-50% AMI: 13 Households

Gender Identity:

- 49 households identified as women;
- 24 identified as men

Race/Ethnicity:

- 3 households reported non-white or mixed race/ethnicity
- 58 reported white/Caucasian race/ethnicity

Age:

- Under 25: 6 Households
- 26 – 34: 16 Households
- 35 – 44: 14 Households
- 45 – 54: 16 Households
- 55 Plus: 21 Households

Children: 26 households had at least 1 child; 46 households had no children

Homelessness: 19 households reported being homeless; 11 were unknown; 43 household reported not being homeless

OBSERVATIONS & OPPORTUNITIES

The good detail about household size and demographics should allow MAPHD housing authorities to make important comparison to the overall voucher population to help identify disproportionate rates of turnback based that might be related to household characteristics. It is also notable that the most cited reason for voucher return was the loss of contact with the voucher recipient. The number of recipients who lost contact is more than double those who could not find an apartment because the payment standard was too low. IF MAPHD continues to track data after implementing programs that support tenants – such as Housing Navigators, it will better be able to identify what practices work at the individual HA level that should be replicated.