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Testimony of Representative Grayson Lookner introducing LD 1546, "An Act To Prevent Homelessness by Establishing the Rental Relief Fund within the Maine State Housing Authority." April 26, 2021

Senator Hickman, Representative Sylvester, and honorable colleagues on the Committee of Labor and Housing. My Name is Grayson Lookner, and I represent the neighborhoods of Libbytown, Nason's Corner, Rosemont, and Stroudwater in Portland. I'm here to introduce LD 1546, "An Act To Prevent Homelessness by Establishing the Rental Relief Fund within the Maine State Housing Authority."

Housing and homelessness were already a crisis in Maine long before the pandemic. Maine is frequently among the states with the least affordable rents when comparing the cost of rent to average wages. Additionally, between 2014 and 2019, some Maine cities and towns saw some of the fastest increasing rents in the country. These dynamics, coupled with the onslaught of the coronavirus pandemic, has resulted in joblessness and a dramatic spike in demand for real estate in Maine, and has led thousands of tenants in our state to the brink of being unable to afford their rent, and subsequently at acute risk of homelessness.

Our state spends millions every year on emergency measures to serve people experiencing homelessness. This money is spent on housing vouchers, emergency room visits, police and emergency intervention, municipal general assistance, indigent legal services, aid to the numerous agencies and nonprofits throughout Maine that serve this population, and a myriad of other costs borne by the public. This money could be much better spent on preventing people from slipping into homelessness in the first place. The best way to do this is to establish in perpetuity the emergency rental assistance program that was created by Federal Funding in the CARES act of 2020.

Preventing renters from falling into homelessness has innumerable benefits for the public. Children in these households will be much more likely to succeed in school; when work becomes available, these renters will be much more likely to pursue those jobs. From a public health perspective, people without stable housing are at a much greater risk of contracting and spreading COVID-19 and other illnesses. People who are able to access rental assistance will be able to afford other basic necessities, and will not need to rely on other public services that are stretched thin. If there is one public expenditure that this state can make that will have the greatest amount of good for Mainers at risk of homelessness, keeping those folks housed is it.

Property owners, management companies, and landlords have all been enthusiastically supportive of the emergency rental assistance program established by the CARES act. So

much so, that I originally thought we could explore mechanisms of funding this program by raising revenues in the state. It has recently come to my attention that with the influx of federal money from the original CARES act and the recently passed American Rescue Plan will allow for this program to be adequately funded for the next several years, therefore, we should take this opportunity to establish this critical service beyond the immediate term.

Nearly 30% of Maine households are renters, and of those nearly half are cost burdened and at risk of eviction. Every year we have a growing number of people experiencing homelessness dying in Portland and around the state from preventable causes. The housing and homelessness crisis must be addressed in a bold manner from this legislature. Establishing the Emergency Rental Relief fund now is one robust way that we can accomplish this.

Thank you for hearing my testimony and I urge you to vote "ought to pass" on LD 1546.