

Amy Smith
122 Bartlett Street #3
Lewiston, ME 04240
207-415-4245
amy.smith@healthyhomeworks.org



April 29, 2021

Testimony of Lewiston resident Amy Smith in support of LD 1397, An Act Directing the Maine State Housing Authority To Create a Commission To Develop a Comprehensive Rental Registry for Multifamily Housing Before the Joint Standing Committee on Labor and Housing

Senator Hickman, Representative Sylvester, and distinguished members of the Joint Standing Committee on Labor and Housing, I am Amy Smith, a resident of downtown Lewiston and president of Healthy Homeworks. I am here today in support of **LD 1397, An Act Directing the Maine State Housing Authority To Create a Commission To Develop a Comprehensive Rental Registry for Multifamily Housing**

I've been a software professional since 1984, designing and implementing solutions to complex data problems, and making the solutions simple for people with limited expertise to understand. When I pivoted my career in 2014 to try my hand at renovating and managing multi-family properties, I quickly started building spreadsheets to aggregate data from lots of different sources to perform due diligence on potential properties. I was very surprised to discover how difficult and time consuming it was to answer basic questions:

- What human actually owns this property, and how can I contact the owner?
- Who is actually responsible for maintenance on the property?
- Are there any outstanding code violations or liens?
- What's the TRUE condition of the property? (because you definitely can't trust seller disclosures)
- Are there any active lead abatement orders in effect, and how extensive are the necessary repairs?

After 5 years of learning these answers in time consuming and financially painful ways, I identified the data set and the data owners that I needed in order to create a comprehensive "report card" on multi-family properties. These data owners include (but are not limited to):

- The person who is responsible for the property (owner, property manager, or business operator)
- The municipality who is responsible for tracking and enforcing code violations
- The Maine CDC who holds all lead abatement order and lead clearance data
- The registry of deeds who records property transfers and liens

The City of Lewiston and Bates College collaborated with me on a prototype system that could bring all of this data together in a timely, simple way so that potential owners and renters would know the truth about a potential investment or home.

The prototype had 2 major gaps:

- Current information about legal ownership, management, and unit configuration that could only come from the property owner or manager.
- Timely lead abatement order data that was only available from the Maine CDC via a lengthy FOAA process.

I served on the 2018-2019 Lewiston ad hoc Rental Registration Committee, where we were able to design a registry that wasn't overly burdensome to landlords and which provided the data needed to fill the first gap. We were in the process of negotiating with the Maine CDC to fill the second gap of timely lead abatement data when COVID hit. As we emerge from the pandemic, I'm hopeful that we can pick this up again and finish the prototype in Lewiston.

I agree that a statewide registry would be beneficial to all. I know through my experience building the prototype that it's feasible to implement and maintain this system for a reasonable cost and with very little effort from the data owners. I'm hopeful that we can authorize a commission to create a pilot program in Lewiston that leverages all of the hard work to date to prove that it can work in one city, with multi-family properties of 3 or more units, and in a way that the data provides meaningful, timely answers.

This work is of the utmost importance, and it's critical that we do it right now. As days, weeks, and months go by, families continue to move into unsafe housing that's poisoning their children, and investors who truly want to do the right thing are purchasing multi-family properties without good data and are finding that it's impossible to actually maintain and run them as safe rental units.