

TESTIMONY OF MEAGAN SWAY, ESQ.

Ought to Pass - LD 1269

An Act To Preserve Fair Housing in Maine

JOINT STANDING COMMITTEE ON
LABOR AND HOUSING

May 5, 2021

Senator Hickman, Representative Sylvester, and distinguished members of the Joint Standing Committee on Labor and Housing, greetings. My name is Meagan Sway, and I am the Policy Director at the ACLU of Maine, a statewide organization committed to advancing and preserving civil rights and civil liberties guaranteed by the Maine and U.S. Constitutions. On behalf of our members, we urge you to support LD 1269.

This act takes a balanced and highly collaborative approach to this serious problem. If enacted, it would direct the Maine State Housing Authority to ensure that public funds are used to engage actively in efforts to address barriers to and create opportunities for full and equal access to housing without discrimination on the basis of race, color, sex, sexual orientation or gender identity, physical or mental disability, religion, ancestry, national origin, familial status or receipt of public assistance. The bill also requires the Maine State Housing Authority to develop a plan and report back to this committee on January 15, 40 2022. Both these requirements would make Maine a fairer state, where all families have the tools necessary to thrive.

This bill would also help Maine solve its acute youth homelessness crisis. According to the Bangor Daily News, between 2015 and 2017, the number of homeless or displaced youth jumped from less than 2,000 to more than 2,500, an approximately 30% increase.¹ Due to the coronavirus and record unemployment in Maine, we can expect this year to be even worse.

This bill would also help hold Maine to its constitutional promise of equal protection. Our homelessness crisis is intertwined with racial inequity and other forms of discrimination.

¹ Robbie Feinberg, *Maine schools under pressure amid spike in youth homelessness*, BDN, April 16, 2019, <https://bangordailynews.com/2019/04/15/news/bangor/maine-schools-under-pressure-amid-spike-in-youth-homelessness/#:~:text=Mikaylah%20is%20one%20of%20a,jump%20from%20two%20years%20prior>.

Unhoused people are disproportionately people of color and people with disabilities. In 2019, for example, although Black and African American people made up less than 2% of Maine's population, they made up 26% of Maine's unhoused population. More than 40% of people experiencing homelessness also suffer from a mental illness, which is just one of the disabilities that people experiencing homelessness disproportionately suffer. This bill would provide increased support to people suffering multiple injustices.

We urge you to vote *ought to pass*.