

Stephen Carnahan
Auburn

My name is Stephen Carnahan, and I am speaking in favor of LR 1656.

I once heard a well-known landlord in Lewiston defend the conditions in his building by saying that if he were not allowed to rent out sub-standard apartments, then some poor people would have no place to live.

As the pastor of a church in Auburn, I worked with those people, these poor people in sub-standard housing. Almost every week someone would come to me for assistance with housing. They needed help to make the rent, or to find a new place. They needed financial assistance with first month-last month-security deposit. They paid their rent, but then needed help with utilities. Or food. Often I paid for a motel room for someone who had been evicted, or simply couldn't find an affordable place.

There was simply no way I could provide as much help as was needed. My small congregation gave a generous amount to a fund to be used for this purpose, but it was never enough. The desperation in people's eyes and voices as they talked to me was heart-breaking. I couldn't help them all. The only thing I felt I could do was to open the eyes of my congregation to the poverty that was around us. I wanted the people of my church to be aware of the problem of housing insecurity. And to realize that there were people in our own congregation that were facing this.

Sometimes I took my confirmation class on a field trip. We didn't go far, just across the street. We went into an apartment building there. It was easy to get in, as the front lock was broken. I led the class up the stairs and back down. The hallways were dark and dirty. The shared bath on the third floor was stained and moldy. My students were in shock. "Why do they live here?" one asked.

The housing problem in Maine is not caused by bad landlords or bad tenants. It is caused by not recognizing housing as a right, and of being unaware of the multiple problems caused when shelter itself is insecure. When people do not have safe, affordable housing, we see increases in poverty, homelessness, mental illness, crime, and loss of educational opportunity. Let us as a state recognize that we all benefit when people are secure in their homes, and do what we can to make it so.