



Maine Association of
Area Agencies on Aging
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TESTIMONY OF JESSICA MAURER, EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR
MAINE ASSOCIATION OF AREA AGENCIES ON AGING

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Senator Patrick, Representative Herbig and members of the Joint Standing Committee on Labor, Commerce, Research and Economic Development:

My name is Jessica Maurer and I am the Executive Director of the Maine Association of Area Agencies on Aging. The Association represents Maine's five Area Agencies on Aging and provides a unifying voice on issues that promote independence, dignity and economic self-reliance for Maine's seniors. Maine's Agencies on Aging work to keep Maine seniors living and aging well in their homes and communities as long as possible.

We urge the passage of LD 1354 although we encourage the Committee to amend the name of the newly created program to the Keeping Seniors Home Program because the concept of "aging in place" is much broader than home repair and weatherization.

Maine is the oldest state in the country by median age. There are more than 300,000 people in Maine over the age of 60 and more than half of those are over 70 years of age. 65,000 Mainers over the age of 65 live alone. We are also the most rural state in the country with one of the highest rates of home ownership. In fact, 90 percent of community dwelling people over the age of 50 own their own homes.

Nearly 10 percent of those 65 and older in Maine are living in poverty. These low-income Mainers are living close to the bone with very little safety net protecting them. They are struggling daily to buy food, heat their homes, fill their gas tanks and pay for uncovered health care costs. They are just meeting their basic needs and do not have resources to fix things that go wrong with their homes.

In 2011, I had the good fortune to assist the state in assessing the needs of older people in Maine in preparation for drafting the current State Plan on Aging. I got to hear first hand from aging Mainers how they are living. I learned that older Mainers pride themselves on their independence and self-reliance. They willingly admit they do not like to ask for help and openly express fears of falling and being unable to maintain their homes. They all want to remain in their homes and communities for as long as they are able.

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Sadly, I heard stories directly from people who were living in homes in need of many repairs, repairs they could not afford. I heard about leaking roofs, bad floors and failing furnaces. I heard from people who couldn't hang new storm doors or fix broken windows. Many talked about isolating themselves in one or two rooms because they couldn't go up stairs, couldn't afford to heat the whole house, didn't have adequate safety mechanisms where they needed them. Many people knew they would be better off financially if they could insulate and weatherize their houses, but had no resources to make the investment.

I want to pause a minute on the connection between the high cost of heating a home and weatherization. Every year, our Meals on Wheels drivers find older people with their mattresses pulled in front of their kitchen stoves. They sleep in front of the stove as a heating source because they cannot afford oil. Low income Mainers need real options to help them reduce their heating costs and to live safely.

Maine's Area Agencies on Aging used to run volunteer home repair programs. However, because of funding cuts, all but one of these programs has ended. The Keeping Seniors Home Program is a godsend for those it serves, but the Program's limited funding means the resources are gone almost as soon as they are available. This leaves many older low-income people with nowhere to turn for help. Because older Mainers often wait far too long to ask for help, they are often in a state of emergency once they do. Finding that there are no resources available leaves the person with only two options: they can live in an unsafe home or abandon the home entirely. Neither is a good option for the person or the community.

For all of these reasons, we urge you to consider passing this bill so that more low income seniors can access the home repair and weatherization services they desperately need. Passing this bill is sound public policy, despite the large fiscal note. We need to attract new workers and businesses to Maine, but we'll be unable to do this with a housing stock that is abandoned and in significant disrepair. We want to keep people living safely in their homes and avoid costly institutionalizations from avoidable falls and injuries. Finally, it signals that the state will be an active partner in helping people age well in their homes and communities.

Thank you.