

July 13, 2020

Governor Janet Mills

1 State House Station

Augusta, ME 04333

**Housing Justice Maine: Open letter to Governor Janet Mills. Mayor Kate Snyder, and the Portland City Council**

Dear Governor Mills,

We are writing to support the [demands](#) of BLM Portland, including the demand that we secure homes for all in Maine. BLM Portland [states](#) that they are “aligned with the Demands and Mission of the national Movement for Black Lives” which “seeks to secure decent housing for all”. They also put out “The Racist History of the City Manager Position in Portland,” a call to replace the City Manager of Portland, Jon Jennings, because he “has repeatedly advocated for policies that hurt poor, predominantly Black and brown people.” Jennings’ advocacy includes the gentrification of the city and criminalizing poverty. Although these demands focus on Portland, they are relevant to the state of Maine as a whole. Addressing the housing crisis will require courage and political risk from you, our leaders. Addressing the housing crisis **requires prioritizing the human rights of low income people over the business interests of developers.**

We unequivocally support those rising up in defense of Black life. We support BLM Portland’s housing demands because we believe that housing is a human right, and that, during the pandemic and always, housing is health care. As a coalition of organizations advocating for housing justice, and with members directly impacted by the housing crisis, we understand the urgency of moving resources now spent on the police in state and city budgets to social services, including housing.

Black, Indigenous, Latinx, and other people of color face extraordinary inequities and discrimination in Maine. In 2014, the Maine Center for Economic Policy found that the poverty rate for Blacks and African Americans was 50%, the highest rate in the country. One in three Native Americans live in poverty. Indigenous people and African Americans experience [unemployment rates](#) that are double the state average. Although Latinx people constitute 1.67% of the population in Maine, they make up 2.44% of those living in poverty. Undocumented workers face substandard housing, poor working

conditions, and almost no help from the government if they lose their jobs. These conditions contribute significantly to the disproportionate rate of COVID-19 among African Americans and the [Latinx community](#) in Maine, found recently to be the worst in the [country](#). During the present pandemic, when unemployment and poverty are exacerbated, the need to address the housing crisis becomes even more urgent.

BLM Portland states that City Manager Jon Jennings “has advocated for a law enforcement approach to poverty, homelessness, and mental and behavioral health struggles.” [Studies](#) in favor of defunding the police argue that law enforcement originated with and still do have the “basic function of managing the poor, foreign, and nonwhite on behalf of a system of economic and political inequality”. In Portland, our members know from the stories of people experiencing homelessness that the police rather than social workers are called upon to address problems that arise, and that police often respond aggressively. In these cases, police involvement and the criminalization of homelessness FURTHER marginalizes, traumatizes, and inconveniences people already experiencing housing insecurity. Unhoused people who are incarcerated are isolated from their communities even more while inside the criminal justice system, and have even less of a chance of securing housing (and also education, jobs, recovery services and much more) when they leave prison. This kind of discrimination can be found in other actions of the Portland police and in Portland schools. Police in Portland arrest Black people at a rate that is more than twice the percentage of the Black population in the [city](#). The city’s insensitivity to this issue is clear in the promotion of the officer who shot [Chance David Baker](#) to be supervisor of the entire [Community Policing Division](#). In schools, the Black student body at Portland High School is 24%, but they account for 60% of the in-school suspensions, and 48% of the out-of-school suspensions. At Casco Bay High School, 24% of the student population is Black, but they account for 57% of the out-of-school [suspensions](#). At the youth detention center [Long Creek](#), Black youth represent an estimated 23% of the detainees, “which is nearly 12 times the Black representation in Maine’s youth population at large.”

In BLM Portland’s call for the replacement of Jennings, they characterize him as “[cheerleading gentrification](#).” Our national allied groups [define gentrification](#) “as a profit-driven racial and class reconfiguration of urban, working-class and communities of color that have suffered from a history of disinvestment and abandonment.... driven by private developers, landlords, businesses, and corporations, and supported by the government through policies that facilitate the process of displacement...” According to Keeanga-Yamahtta Taylor, the real estate industry cannot provide the solution to this problem because of its history of redlining and other forms of discrimination (*Race for*

*Profit*, 2019). The [redesigning](#) of Franklin Street in Portland in the late 60's was the worst example of gentrification, but it proceeds at full speed in [Muntjoy Hill](#), [Bayside](#) and East Bayside, "once best known for its racially diverse [population](#)."

We agree with BLM Portland's assessment of Jon Jennings's policy record and budget priorities, often enacted with full support of the City Council. We applaud the Ithaca, New York common council resolution to cancel rent debt and obligate landlords to extend rental agreements throughout the entirety of the pandemic.

Housing Justice Maine calls on state and Portland officials to give up the policies of gentrification, defund the police, and put the money into housing as a human right. Since 2008, the city of Portland has increased the police budget by 40%. In the 2020 city of Portland budget, the police are receiving \$17,757,540, whereas \$13,167,747 is budgeted for Social Services, which provides "financial assistance and support for low-income Portland residents." Only a portion of that goes towards serving the thousands of residents who apply for rental assistance each year; typically, only about 10% of those actually get placed in an affordable home. [Much of that money](#) comes from state and federal grants. The city must increase the production of the kind of affordable housing that enables Black, Indigenous, Latinx and other people of color to rise out of poverty. The city must also stop supporting development projects that facilitate the process of displacement.

We at Housing Justice Maine make the following commitments:

1. We will prioritize the leadership of Black, Indigenous, and other people of color within our organization.
2. We will seek to be in alignment with Black Lives Matter organizing.
3. We will prioritize strategies for housing justice and the necessary research in situations in which Black, Indigenous, and other people of color are disproportionately affected, including racial discrimination and segregation in the housing market and public policy.

Sincerely,

**Housing Justice Maine**

**Housing Justice Maine is a coalition that includes the Maine Immigrant Housing Coalition, Maine People's Housing Coalition, Maine People's Alliance, Presente! Maine, Raise-Op Housing Cooperative, Southern Maine Workers' Center, and Maine Equal Justice.**