

# Housing Justice Maine

“We believe housing is a human right and we seek to empower those residents most deeply impacted by an oppressive housing system.”

Dear Senator Susan Collins,

Maine, as well as the rest of the nation, faced a severe housing crisis before COVID-19 began. COVID-19 has made the experience of those who are homeless or living with unstable housing even worse. Immigrants living in crowded homes and performing essential work at meat and seafood facilities have been forced to continue working in high-exposure conditions or face being fired. Many of these workers are unable to access unemployment insurance or stimulus relief, and if they choose to avoid the hazards at work, they risk their ability to pay for things like food and rent. People who are homeless have lost access to many of the mental health and shelter services previously available to them, and crowded shelters have become places where risk of infection has increased. Many more people who were already choosing before the pandemic between food, education, medicine, and housing have had to prioritize housing payments at the cost of other essential things. While reports in Maine have shown that income losses for landlords “have not been as bad as expected,” these reports do not necessarily address the ways in which tenants are sacrificing their financial and physical health in order to keep their homes during this crisis. In other words, the losses in the housing system are being balanced largely on the backs of our homeless, our essential workers, and our poorest and most vulnerable people.

Housing is healthcare, and the housing crisis must not be ignored nor viewed as a separate issue from COVID-19 and public health at large. Any solution or relief for COVID-19 must include housing as an integral part of the solution. Furthermore, we should not accept a return to normal, where thousands of people in Maine are homeless every night, 22,000 households cannot access safe and affordable housing, hundreds of households are evicted each month, and white affluent neighborhoods segregate themselves from the reality the rest of us are facing. People were suffering before COVID-19, people are suffering even more so now, and we want to see real action that addresses these problems.

- 1) **Congress should make relief actions and programs inclusive of everyone in our country, regardless of immigration status.** This includes making applications for relief available in different languages, and offering culturally relevant housing solutions for families who need it. If people are living and working in overcrowded conditions, then relief programs should seek to de-concentrate those spaces to provide real support and protection for people. This includes offering hotel

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rooms or other new housing for people to quarantine or live, at least temporarily, until there is a vaccine and people can safely congregate indoors.

- 2) **Congress should pass S. 3685/H.R. 6820, the “Emergency Rental Assistance and Rental Market Stabilization Act,”** which would provide \$100 billion in emergency rental assistance to help low-income renters avoid evictions and homelessness. The bill, introduced by Senator Sherrod Brown (D-OH) and Representatives Maxine Waters (D-CA) and Denny Heck (D-WA), has the support of 40 Senate cosponsors and nearly 160 House cosponsors. Emergency rental assistance is needed to avoid creating a financial cliff for renters when eviction moratoriums are lifted and back-rent is owed, and to ensure the continued viability of our country’s essential affordable housing infrastructure.
- 3) **Congress should pass S. 4097/H.R.7402, the “Protecting Renters from Evictions and Fees Act,”** introduced by Senator Elizabeth Warren (D-MA) and Representatives Jesus “Chuy” Garcia (DIL) and Barbara Lee (D-CA) to extend and broaden the eviction moratoriums included in the CARES Act to protect all renters in the U.S. for a full year. This protection is especially important in a moment when our collective health depends on each of us staying home.
- 4) **Congress should pass S. 3856/H.R. 6724, the “Public Health Emergency Shelter Act,”** introduced by Senator Elizabeth Warren (D-MA) and Representative Ayanna Pressley (D-MA) to provide an additional \$11.5 billion to respond to and prevent outbreaks among people experiencing homelessness. People who are homeless and contract coronavirus are twice as likely to be hospitalized, two to four times as likely to require critical care, and two to three times as likely to die than others in the general public. If unchecked, as many as 20,000 people who are homeless could require hospitalization and nearly 3,500 could die, with enormous implications for individuals, their communities, and our already overstretched hospital systems. Funds are needed to minimize the number of people living in homeless encampments and congregate shelters and identify alternative space, including hotels, for isolation and self-quarantine, as well as funding for short-term rental assistance and housing stabilization services.

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- 5) **Congress should provide \$13 billion for public housing agencies, HUD and USDA housing providers, and Tribal housing authorities** to help keep residents safe and healthy during this crisis, and to issue 100,000 new emergency Housing Choice Vouchers.

Thank you for taking action on this critical issue.

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.*