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Testimony of Rep. Raegan LaRochelle presenting
LD 2006, An Act to Improve the Low-income Home Energy Assistance Program
Before the Joint Standing Committee on Labor and Housing

Good morning Senator Daughtry, Representative Sylvester and esteemed colleagues of the Labor and Housing Committee. I am Representative Raegan LaRochelle and I represent House District 86, part of Augusta. I am here today to present **LD 2006, An Act to Improve the Low-income Home Energy Assistance Program**.

Each one of us are in the privileged position of being our constituent's advocate at the State House. As a new legislator, one of the issues I've been hearing most about are the rapidly rising energy prices. Even prior to the events happening across the globe, Mainers saw the price of home heating fuel increase dramatically over the past year. In fact, in February 2021, the statewide average monthly heating price per gallon was \$2.42. Last month, in February 2022, it was \$3.75.¹ That is over \$1.30 per gallon more than last year at this time. Let's keep in mind that these are average statewide prices, so in some parts of the state the cost per gallon of home heating fuel is even higher. Now, gas prices are rising to levels we have not seen in over a decade and our neighbors are feeling the financial crunch, particularly those on fixed incomes, seniors, young families and our most vulnerable citizens.

Recently, there have been reports that MaineHousing's Home Energy Assistance Program (HEAP) has more money in it than ever before, and while this is great news, people are unable to receive these funds in a timely manner due to significant delays in processing and approving applications. This bill aims to increase ease of access to the existing assistance funds by providing support to MaineHousing and the CAP agencies who administer the funds to improve their processes.

Specifically, LD 2006 directs MaineHousing to establish the HEAP Administrative Efficiency Fund. The provided funds would be used for the purpose of increasing the capacity to accept and process applications in a timely manner for the current heating season. I recognize that spring is on its way and the use of home heating fuel will soon decrease, however, as of today and over

¹ State of Maine Governor's Energy Office. <https://www.maine.gov/energy/heating-fuel-prices>. Historical Monthly Heating Oil Prices (PDF). Retrieved March 5, 2022.

the next few weeks, this will remain a critical concern for the people we represent. This is why this bill is an emergency.

Additionally, the funds we allocate to the Administrative Efficiency Fund can be used for providing resources to establish a long-term system to efficiently process HEAP applications in future years.

The bill also directs MaineHousing to convene a working group to investigate ways to improve and increase the efficiency of the HEAP program, and explicitly states the working group must include one or more individuals who have used the program. I believe it is crucial that we include these perspectives in this conversation and work to build a system that directly addresses the primary obstacles they are facing.

I have learned quickly in my first few months as a legislator that I cannot fix each issue my constituents are facing as quickly or completely as I'd like, but with your support, I hope this bill can first help those who are need of assistance this winter, and aid in the creation of a better system where Mainers across the state do not have to wait weeks or months for their HEAP application to be approved.

Thank you for your time. I am happy to take any questions.