



HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

2 STATE HOUSE STATION
AUGUSTA, MAINE 04333-0002

(207) 287-1400

TTY: Maine Relay 711

Rachel Talbot Ross

Assistant House Majority Leader

Office: (207) 287-1430

Rachel.TalbotRoss@legislature.maine.gov

May 5, 2021

Testimony of Assistant House Majority Leader Rachel Talbot Ross presenting
LD 1269, An Act To Preserve Fair Housing in Maine
Before the Joint Standing Committee on Labor and Housing

Senator Hickman, Representative Sylvester and distinguished members of the Joint Standing Committee on Labor and Housing, my name is Rachel Talbot Ross. I represent House District 40, which includes the Portland neighborhoods of Parkside, Bayside, East Bayside, Oakdale and the University of Southern Maine campus. Thank you for the opportunity to present **LD 1269, An Act To Preserve Fair Housing in Maine**.

The 1968 Fair Housing Act was a monumental, bipartisan, milestone civil rights bill. It changed the landscape of equal access to housing for Americans.

More than a decade ago, it was apparent there was room to further the effort to make sure that the Fair Housing Act truly reached everyone. After seeking and incorporating input from the public, a carefully thought out rule was implemented to help remedy shortcomings and inequities, so that people had fair and equal access to housing everywhere.

In 2020, to the shock and horror of many, the Trump Administration forced through policy changes to purposefully undermine the Fair Housing Act and promoted this effort to potential voters in suburban districts as heroic, announcing that the President was looking out for people in the suburbs – by keeping “unwanted” people out. The President put through the rule change without even a nod to public input, which was even more worrisome.

That bit of history showed us the vulnerability of the Fair Housing Act. It showed us the fragility of this nation’s commitment to having equal access to housing for all people. It showed us that people in Maine are vulnerable to the whims of a federal administration. It showed us that there is room and, indeed, need for Maine to fortify its commitment to all forms of equity.

With LD 1269, Maine will insist that it will provide consistent, equal access to housing, regardless of the whims of the federal government. It says that if the federal government fails in its commitment to equity and equal access to housing, Maine shall persevere. It says, in a plain and simple manner, “Maine won’t discriminate.”

This bill would amend the laws governing MaineHousing to ensure that its funding is used to affirmatively further fair housing, which is quite simply defined as, “to engage actively in efforts to address barriers to and create opportunities for full and equal access to housing without discrimination on the basis of race, color, sex, sexual orientation or gender identity, physical or mental disability, religion, ancestry, national origin, familial status or receipt of public assistance.”

The bill also directs MaineHousing report back to this committee about its efforts and its findings in terms of affirmatively furthering fair housing and fair and equal access to housing. This sets the stage for the Legislature to keep its eyes on how the state is doing at ensuring equal and fair access to housing.

This is not a very heavy lift for MaineHousing. In fact, aside from reporting to this committee, MaineHousing has been operating under these rules for more than a decade. What we’re asking for them is to persist if and when the rules change, even if only temporarily, at the federal level.

Maine should be fierce in its commitment to equal access to housing for all Mainers. Regardless of a person’s race, color, sex, sexual orientation or gender identity, disability status, religion, ancestry, national origin, familial status or use of public benefits – everyone should have fair and equal access to housing.

This bill declares that Maine will stand its ground and not be swayed by the whims of a federal administration to undermine its commitments to all of its people. Maine will continue to do the right thing and see that everyone has fair and equal access to housing.

I will add that it may be challenging for Maine to stand its ground in the face of a federal change of course. Maine may be put under pressure by a federal administration to discriminate in the future. What I believe, and I hope that you will agree, is that it is vital for Maine to stand for what is right and not for what may be convenient for a federal administration. Doing the right thing isn’t always convenient, but it is particularly important in this case.

I do want to note that I understand MaineHousing may have some suggestions in order to clarify that this bill applies to funds they control. I would be glad to bring proposed language to the committee at work session to reflect this clarification.

I urge you to pass this bill to ensure that all Mainers have consistently fair and equal access to housing. Thank you for your attention and consideration. I would be happy to answer questions you may have for me.