

The Long Game

MaineHousing

Legislative Advocacy: State Advocacy

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Estimates suggest that to respond effectively to Maine's affordable housing needs, the state needs 25,000 more affordable units. Key to MaineHousing's mission is to build and preserve affordable housing, but as anyone in the housing field will tell you: it's not cheap; it's not built overnight. This is about the long game.

In 2017, a bill was introduced to create a Maine state affordable housing tax credit. However, the bill was flawed in a number of ways - including that it lacked public purpose and less than 65% of the funds would go toward building desperately needed housing for Mainers. The bill died in committee, but not before it laid the groundwork of bi-partisan support needed to get the job done during the next legislative session.

With that in mind, MaineHousing's policy staff worked with the Maine Affordable Housing Coalition (MAHC) to begin building a coalition of legislators, agencies, and advocacy organizations who could move a better state housing tax credit forward through the legislative process. The much improved bill was crafted with input from a number of partners, and included set aside funding for rural development and for people with disabilities.

“Send that bill to my desk and I will sign it.”
- Maine Governor Janet Mills

Advocacy partners like MAHC and others increased the public profile of the bill and mobilized support. With this support backing up the creation of a state tax credit program, MaineHousing was able to work closely with the advocacy community, the bill sponsors, and the legislative oversight committee to craft the framework necessary to make the credit actually work if it was signed into law.

The following legislative session was an advantageous time to introduce the bill. A group of bipartisan legislators committed to housing initiatives had worked with MaineHousing and other housing experts and advocates to create good, sound public policy in the form of LD 1645: An Act To Create Affordable Workforce and Senior Housing and Preserve Affordable Rural Housing. Maine Governor Janet Mills praised the bill in her State of the State address saying, “Send that bill to my desk and I will sign it.” The public conversation had started to shift with more people understanding that a safe, affordable place to live is not only a basic necessity, but the place from which their fellow Mainers could thrive and build community.

In May 2019, the co-sponsors of the bill, Rep. Ryan Fecteau, (D) (now Maine's Speaker of the House) and Sen. Matt Pouliot (R) [wrote an op-ed for the Bangor Daily News](#) urging their fellow legislators to support the legislation. In June 2019, MaineHousing Director Dan Brennan [wrote an op-ed for the Bangor Daily News](#) urging the Appropriations Committee to invest in the Maine they want to see, noting:

Where we live shapes our lives. Maine is full of amazing people, communities and possibilities. And the possibilities for Maine are endless when we build quality homes that Mainers can afford. It means more young people (which we are desperate to recruit and keep in Maine) and healthier people and communities. It means breaking generational poverty and eventually spending less on general assistance and other social services.

It means investing in the Maine we want: a place where everyone can afford a good, safe home.

The Appropriations Committee passed the bill with a few edits, changing an \$80 million investment of tax credits over four years to \$80 million over eight. But - as we know - this is about the long game. It wasn't a deal breaker for those involved, and it didn't lessen the impact of doubling our capacity to build affordable housing units for Mainers.

LD 1645 passed the House 132-4 and unanimously in the Senate. On February 12, 2020, Governor Janet Mills signed the bill into law. During the bill signing ceremony, she said,

The goal of ensuring that Maine people have a safe place to rest their head at night, a place where they can take care of their family, get ready for work, and live with dignity and comfort is at the heart of our administration. With this program, I hope we can now say to thousands more Maine people, 'welcome home'.

When it was all said and done, the investment of tax credits over the next 8 years will address Maine's most pressing affordable housing needs. Ten percent of the annual Maine Affordable Housing Tax Credit allocation must preserve rural development. The statute directs MaineHousing to target at least 30% of tax credits to senior housing and 20% to housing in rural areas. In addition, 20% of the units (a minimum of four) are prioritized for people in need of supportive services.

In early 2021, MaineHousing issued the first round of the Maine Affordable Housing Tax Credits. An additional 186 units (163 of which are affordable) were added to the tally of desperately needed units because of the state tax credit. It adds - and will continue to add - to the momentum we have for building affordable housing here in Maine.

This new law is a testament to the hard work of many people - but not so hard that it can't be done in other states. What we've found in Maine - which we know is true across the U.S. - is that playing the long game is necessary to chip away at that 20,000 affordable units we need. MaineHousing staff found a thread of political will and had the political acumen and relationships necessary to weave that thread into legislation that even the most skeptical lawmakers could get behind. The legislation was clear in its public purpose, highlighted areas of need, and directed funds to a tried and true trusted partner in MaineHousing.

And we're just getting started.



Governor Janet Mills speaks at the signing of LD 1645 while MaineHousing Director Dan Brennan looks on.