

February 22, 2017

Good Afternoon Senator Hamper, Representative Gattine and members of the Joint Standing Committee on Appropriations and Financial Affairs; Senator Brakey, Representative Hymanson and members of the Health and Human Services Committee:

My name is Leopold Ndayisabye. I am a Caseworker at the Preble Street Resource Center, where I have worked for the past 5 years.

I am testifying before you today in strong opposition to the proposal to eliminate the General Assistance program in the proposed biennial budget as well as the separate proposal to eliminate GA and state-funded TANF and SNAP for certain lawfully present immigrants, including asylum seekers.

I came to the USA as an asylum seeker from Rwanda. I fled my country in May 2011 due to persecution, torture and the fear of being assassinated. I left behind my wife and 4 children, my assets, my culture, my job etc. I had been working as a humanitarian worker for 10 years before opening my own company. I worked as a community development consultant for 7 years for Norway, Belgium, the American Red Cross, Switzerland, and the Netherlands in different countries (Rwanda, Burundi, Congo, and Kenya). As many asylum seekers from Africa, I'm educated. I have an extensive experience in social work.

Fleeing my country was a severe traumatic experience, especially after being physically and mentally tortured. Ultimately this is the case for many asylum seekers. I wish none should experience our horrible stories. My only hope was to find a place where there is no discrimination based on human thoughts or other political interest.

I am currently so thankful and happy due to my successful social and economic integration into Maine. I have been able to earn my Masters Degree while working and taking care of my family. In addition to helping people, my job at Preble Street allows me to pay taxes, insurance, rent, utilities and therefore contribute actively to the social and economic life of the State of Maine. This happened thanks to short term help from General Assistance.

General Assistance and the state-funded TANF and SNAP programs are a lifeline for many people who need temporary assistance to gain their footing. GA is not only a lifeline for asylum seekers, but also for people born and raised in Maine who need short term assistance to cover their housing costs or food. Some people need this assistance after getting laid off from a job, or experiencing a family tragedy, or because of a serious medical issue.

I think about a single mother I know with 4 children, another family with children I know, and the many other New Mainers and Old Mainers who might be thrown on the street the day after the General Assistance program ended. It would be nothing short of a statewide emergency. Rates of homelessness would sky rocket. I think about all those kids who will be one more time traumatized, perhaps not able to go to school because of their parents' housing jeopardy, without access to food or shelter, all because of a political choice. Maine has a budget surplus. There is no budgetary rationale to make such a drastic cut to services.

That is why I implore your wisdom and your power to oppose the proposal to eliminate these programs.

Thank you for taking the time to hear my comments.