

**1. Testimony of Lisa Black, TRIO Director at Kennebec Valley Community College,
in support of reforms to ASPIRE/TANF**

September 1, 2021

Good afternoon Senator Claxton, Representative Meyer and members of the Health and Human Services Committee. My name is Lisa Black and I live in Bangor, Maine. I am the Director of Kennebec Valley Community College's TRIO program, a federally funded college access and student success program. I do not represent KVCC or the Maine Community College System. I am here today on my own time and of my own accord as a private citizen because I firmly believe in higher education as a pathway out of generational poverty—yet all too often I see the systems intended to support the students I serve backfiring. I would like to highlight two reforms I believe are necessary for ASPIRE to fulfill its mission of moving participants through degree programs into high-wage careers. Unfortunately, the way Fedcap currently administers ASPIRE works **against** student parents by imposing impossible strictures that make college success out of reach and assigning case management that does not provide relevant or effective support. These outcomes are supported by the data in the LIFT report, too, with **more than 3 out of 4 people who moved off TANF not receiving education or training opportunities beyond high school. And in July 2021, just 20 parents were enrolled in Parents as Scholars.**

The majority of my students are returning adult learners with low income who, if successful, would be the first in their families to earn a college degree. This population is already at risk, but students in this demographic who are also parents are particularly vulnerable. When life inevitably happens and children get sick, unexpected bills crop up, or worse, the competing

demands of work, home, elder, and childcare become exponentially harder to juggle. The very college classes that promise a way out of precarious financial situations are the first to fall by the wayside. This leads to academic and financial consequences at students' academic institutions that jeopardize their ability to return, trapping them in a system that was supposed to offer a way out.

Benefit programs like TANF and ASPIRE provide crucial financial support to struggling families and are intended to provide the safety net necessary to mitigate crises they are particularly vulnerable to, but the way the programs are structured sets recipients up for failure. The expectation that ASPIRE recipients carry a full-time course load is particularly unrealistic. ASPIRE participants must be enrolled in a course of study that will lead to employment in a high-demand sector of the workforce, and these programs of study are rigorous by design – they are challenging even for students without family responsibilities to do full-time. And crucially— **these programs require far more study time than the one hour for each hour spent in class that ASPIRE allows for** to achieve the minimum grades necessary to move forward in these specialized fields. Further, many approved programs of study also require entrance exams like the TEAS (Test of Essential Academic Skills) that require a tremendous amount of outside studying and often multiple retests to attain necessary cut scores. Another barrier comes in the summertime, when fewer classes are offered and it is therefore much harder to carry a full-time course load (nor is it advantageous to do so due to the condensed format). **All of this leads to creative cobbling together of credits and course schedules that do nothing to benefit students in terms of degree completion and almost always lead to drop out--just to satisfy the requirements to participate in ASPIRE.**

A related barrier is the outsourced case management through Fedcap that participants are subject to. Students routinely report that Fedcap case workers have a tone of policing and not believing them that is demoralizing. I have observed Fedcap's cookie cutter approach that ignores the needs of students with complicated lives on many occasions. The way the program is currently set up puts Fedcap workers in the role of academic advisor when approving or denying a participant's degree plan when they are woefully misinformed about how higher ed works. A recent example was Fedcap's insistence on a degree change for a participant more than $\frac{3}{4}$ of the way through a participant's program of study that would have made her ineligible to receive the financial aid necessary to stay enrolled.

These dynamics put students who are trying to meet Fedcap workers' demands in the middle, forced to explain very complicated policies that are challenging even for professional advisors to understand. My students also report that the workshops they can take through Fedcap as an alternative to classes at the college are irrelevant to their lives and leave them feeling condescended to. All of this leads to dropout and more financial debt than when student parents started, and much less faith in the programs we promise will lead them and their families out of poverty.

Luckily, we have models in Maine that DO work for supporting first generation student parents with low-income. Maine's new HOPE program, for example, provides individualized navigation services tailored to a participant's unique needs. Crucially, they also partner with professional advisors at the institutions where participants are enrolled to ensure coordination of services and smooth progress through degree programs. Participants feel that their HOPE navigators see and believe in them. My own program, TRIO Student Support Services, also gets

excellent results and takes an individualized approach that partners with ASPIRE-eligible students to create customizable degree plans that work.

I stand in awe of my students and the mountains they move in order to be in school. These are the hardworking people we need in Maine's workforce, and with the appropriate supports, Maine parents who have been trapped in generational poverty *can* change the trajectory of their lives and those of their children. There are models that are working right now across the state, but they need to be expanded so more student parents can be successful. I appreciate this opportunity to share my observations about the lived realities of first-generation college student parents who access ASPIRE benefits and ask that you please re-design ASPIRE with their needs in mind. I am happy to answer any questions you might have.



The Maine Coalition
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September 1, 2021

Joint Standing Committee on Health and Human Services
Senator Ned Claxton, Chair
Representative Michele Meyer, Chair

Re: MCEDV Public Comment on LIFT Report (Public Law 2019, Ch. 485; An Act to Reduce Child Poverty by Leveraging Investments so Families Can Thrive).

Dear Senator Claxton, Representative Meyer, and honorable members of the Joint Standing Committee on Health and Human Services:

My name is Andrea Mancuso, and I am submitting these comments on behalf of the Maine Coalition to End Domestic Violence (MCEDV)¹ in response to the LIFT Report submitted to the Committee pursuant to Public Law 2019, Chapter 485. As noted in the report, MCEDV was a member of the Working Group to Improve Operation of Systems and Programs Administered by DHHS to Persons In Need, and we urge you to support the report's recommendations for system reform.

Maine's domestic violence resource centers work with survivors of domestic abuse and violence every day who are struggling to obtain or maintain benefits that are critical to their ability not only to be safe from abuse and violence but to exist on a path to wellbeing. On average, survivors of domestic abuse and violence attempt to separate from their abusive partner several times before being able to separate successfully. The ability to secure stable housing and relative financial security is essential to that success. Many victims remain with abusive partners or in unsafe situations because they cannot afford to separate. When many do separate, they do so without any financial resources.

¹ MCEDV represents the network of Maine's eight regional domestic violence resource centers as well the Immigrant Resource Center of Maine. Collectively, our membership served more than 12,500 survivors of domestic abuse and violence and their children in 2020. This included more than 600 Mainers, 265 of whom were children, who accessed our emergency sheltering programs, approximately 5,000 survivors who accessed our legal services programs, and approximately 2,000 protective parents involved in Maine's child welfare system. On any given day in Maine, our programs serve approximately 500 people across the state. Many staff within our network are also survivors themselves.

We know there are caring and well-intentioned people involved in administering these programs. Our advocacy teams work with them every day across the state. However, the application of policies and statutes continues to be extraordinarily inconsistent depending on region, office and, too frequently, on the personalities and values of individuals. This level of unpredictability within Maine's anti-poverty programs creates needless and harmful barriers to accessing what can be life-saving supports for the families we work with. That barriers exist is clearly demonstrated through the incredible number of families who are eligible for these programs but who are not benefiting from them. Anti-poverty programs managed either directly or indirectly through the Department of Health and Human Services need to better account for the many layers of people's lives. The LIFT Report is a roadmap for that work.

This committee hears frequently about the types of adverse childhood experiences that lead to negative outcomes and sometimes life-long struggles. These exist in nearly every family that obtains services through our network – as all are impacted by abuse and violence of some kind within the home. And the best way to support child resiliency in overcoming adverse childhood experiences is fostering a strong bond with a supportive parent and striving for stability.² Making access to benefits more efficient for families – reducing additional and unnecessary layers of bureaucracy and disconnection – is in all of our best interests in preventing long-term negative outcomes for Maine's children.³

All too often, the ability of survivors to access or remain in stable homes, care for their children, and meet their daily needs is dependent on navigation through or compliance with what have long been very opaque systems that will either help, not help, or actively harm, with little to no predictability even to the professionals who frequently engage with these systems. In our work with survivors, we know there are those in Maine who have not been able to achieve the level of safety or stability they were reaching for due directly to a failure of one of Maine's anti-poverty programs to respond effectively.

One area where our network can offer particular insight is around good cause exemptions. Good cause exemptions exist in acknowledgment that sometimes what seem like reasonable program policies and requirements are, in practice, unattainable for a variety of reasons that policymakers have agreed should not prevent access to needed resources for that family. For survivors of domestic abuse and violence in particular, the ability to access good-cause exemptions exists because of a recognition in federal and state statutes that access to public benefits is often critical to the financial security that is foundational to the success of a survivor's plan to separate from an abusive partner as well as in recognition of the need for many survivors to access benefits with a different layer of confidentiality to

² See "Protective Factors & Resiliency," Promising Futures: Best Practices for Serving Children, Youth, and Parents Experiencing Domestic Violence (2016) (<http://promising.futureswithoutviolence.org/what-do-kids-need/supporting-parenting/protective-factors-resiliency/>).

³ The US CDC's Technical Package on Preventing Intimate Partner Violence Across the Lifespan explicitly recognizes "strengthening economic supports" as a key part of their preventative framework (<https://www.cdc.gov/violenceprevention/pdf/ipv-technicalpackages.pdf>).



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maintain their safety. And yet, neither eligibility for access to good-cause exemptions nor the process for obtaining one is transparent,⁴ and many survivors who try to assert a good-cause exemption or ask about their eligibility are met with inappropriate pushback and demoralizing judgment. This is indicative of program-wide biases, both those held by individuals as well as those entrenched in program policies and protocols, that families accessing benefits are disinclined towards program compliance and will always attempt to inappropriately shirk responsibilities associated with participation as well as reflecting a pervasive lack of training and education for program administrators and front-line staff around domestic abuse and violence.⁵

How have current system failures impacted survivors? One survivor sat for several hours at her local DHHS office in order to meet with a caseworker about MaineCare benefits. When it was finally her turn, the caseworker told her that the Department would be grant her MaineCare application but would also seek to establish a child support order against the children's father to recoup financial losses. This survivor had experienced years of horrific abuse to her and her children and was convinced such a step would result in retaliation. She ended up calling an advocate in the middle of the appointment hysterically crying because the caseworker told her that the abuse she and her children had suffered at the hands of her children's father, who had been out of the picture for at least five years, was too far back in time to justify exempting her case from the Department's policy of seeking a child support order and that her safety concerns were therefore not valid. The advocate could hear the caseworker in the background aggressively telling the survivor that, if she felt unsafe, she could just go to the court and get a protection order and that would solve the problem. The mother left the building without completing the application for benefits as a result. For another survivor in Maine's Address Confidentiality Program, she was incorrectly told by an OFI caseworker that they couldn't accept her ACP address and she needed to give them her

⁴ An example of this program-wide lack of transparency around eligibility for a good cause exemption is Fedcap's own website. Although it has a tab specifically denoted as "Good Cause" and that page boldly poses the question "What is Good Cause?" it does not at all attempt to answer that question. The only information available on that page about good cause says, "A finding of Good Cause allows the participant to temporarily suspend compliance with ASPIRE-TANF rules and policies, including participation in a particular activity. Contact Fedcap if you have a Good Cause Claim." (<https://fedcapmaine.org/good-cause/>).

⁵ In addition to the examples of survivor experience noted later in these comments, a clear example of the lack of training for anti-poverty program staff is that Fedcap, a statewide program, offers as a statewide resource on its website concerning good cause exemptions the contact information for Through These Doors, the domestic violence resource center that serves only Cumberland County. This demonstrates an insufficient understanding of resources that exist in the community to help program participants navigate the full range of barriers that may exist to sustained employment.

actual residential address. In a subsequent court proceeding, the abuser's attorney subpoenaed the OFI record, which contained the survivor's home address. The survivor needed to relocate to a new address, her children to new schools. As these two examples attest, a given worker's approach can have devastating and far-ranging impacts for families.

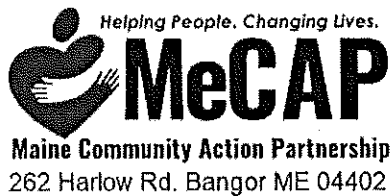
Survivors need Maine's anti-poverty programs to commit to reducing barriers to accessing benefits and to better understanding and responding to trauma and the impacts of abuse. And they need these programs to approach struggling families prioritizing support in lieu of passing judgment. Where a strong safety net is essential to the ability of survivors in Maine to live free of abuse and violence, MCEDV is committed to continuing to work with DHHS and other interested parties to support needed reforms, such as those outlined in the LIFT Report.

Thank you for the opportunity to share our perspective. If MCEDV or any of our member programs can be of assistance to the Committee as this conversation continues, please do not hesitate to let me know.

Sincerely,



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Senator Claxton, Representative Meyer, ladies and gentlemen of the Joint Committee on Health and Human Services, I am Megan Hannan, Executive Director of Maine Community Action Partnership, an early and avid supporter of Public Law 2019, Ch. 485 (LD 1774), *An Act to Reduce Child Poverty by Leveraging Investments so Families Can Thrive*.

For more than 50 years, Community Action has served as a dynamic and community-based force in addressing the causes and conditions of poverty throughout Maine and the country. Our ten Community Action Agencies (CAAs) deliver programs and services for people with low- and moderate income, including many of those addressed in this report: the Home Energy Assistance Program, or HEAP; workforce development; the current rental relief program; Head Start / Early Head Start, childcare, WIC and more.

We are pleased that many of the areas addressed in the 2020 report of the working group have been addressed and thank Commissioner Lambrew and her team for their efforts. We have not yet been able to complete the suggestion that MaineHousing enable categorical eligibility for HEAP or to combine systems, but we have had meeting with Dan Brennan, Executive Director of MaineHousing and Anthony Pelotte, Director, Office for Family Independence, to work that into phase II of the new My Maine Connection replacement portal.

I will note that when I went to My Maine Connection, HEAP is included on the page and there is a link to MaineHousing's HEAP website, but it takes another click to find the Community Action Agency in your county, then takes you to the home page of the CAA, requiring more digging. If you know what to look for, it's two more clicks to a very long list of what you need to bring with you to apply. You can make an appointment online, but the application usually has to be done in person, a drive to your local CAA office. Now, of course, we are doing them by phone but the paperwork has to be mailed in.

This is just one example of what The Atlantic writer Annie Lowrey dubbed *The Time Tax*, asking: Why is so much American bureaucracy left to average citizens?

The 2021 report we are discussing today, *Measures of Child and Family Economic Security for Families Participating in Maine's Public Assistance Programs*, contains a wealth of important and interesting information, and I was happy to have it all in one place. Again, the measures the Department has taken to improve customer service and remove barriers is good to see. I am happy to report that in the case of the Whole Families program funded by TANF, ten of the 11 agencies providing the program are Community Action agencies. Eliminating poverty is our mission, and working with the Department and others to reduce and remove barriers, to strengthen program outcomes and to ensure we are enrolling every person eligible for the programs is essential to that mission.

Expanding MaineCare is without a doubt one of the most important changes to the lives of real people. For too many, lack of healthcare was the reason for their poverty. Adding dental, mental and substance use disorder services directly leads to longer, healthier lives and the ability to have and hold jobs or higher education. Making changes to the food supplement, or SNAP, to be more in line with the world in which we now live is a practical, but important change. New employment programs are key, although I am not sure we needed to invent new names and rules for each, there could have been some streamlining there.

In all, the changes so far are good. I look forward to working with our partners and all State Departments to continue to find ways to improve the customer experience. As noted above, people with low income are forced to do work several times, handing over the same paperwork, telling the same stories, to person after person. We ask too much of our customers, and much of it is unnecessary.

Thank you for your time.

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Testimony for the Health and Human Services Committee

September 1, 2021

6 years ago, my then husband was arrested.

I struggled to come to terms with the idea that I had to provide for my five young children myself. Until that time I had been a stay-at-home mother. With no natural support, I found myself applying for Temporary assistance for needy families. My first experience with TANF was before Fedcap. A woman supported me with applying for school. My journey began with a newborn baby, four other children and a small step forward. I was able to secure employment at the Big Apple and my ex-husbands mother was able to babysit for me. I cannot recall why I didn't qualify for childcare with my 24 hours a week working and my full-time course load. I made my \$8.00 an hour and food stamps stretch by a miracle each month. I was removed from TANF because we did not meet deprivation standards. Supervised visitation was considered contact with my husband and not deprivation. No one cared that we were living in significant poverty.

Fast forward to 2018 and I found myself still struggling with an earning power of \$12.00 an hour. I was still enrolled in college full-time. Their father went to prison, but this meant I had no child support. I applied once again for TANF.

My first fedcap worker was rude and kept telling me I wasn't doing enough to justify childcare. This person discouraged my continued attendance in my degree program. I filled out the paperwork for parents as scholars' multiple times and the paperwork was always "lost". I was enrolled at UMA full-time plus working around 20 hours. My childcare was often not paid. I would often get called at work and told that my children would not be able to attend if payment was not received. I was never "eligible" for my car repairs through Fedcap. One woman told me that getting it fixed and then paying for it with my credit card meant that it was not a barrier for me. The process to get your car fixed was so involved that I could not wait for all the red tape to utilize the program or I would lose my job. I never got money for clothes or even offered the benefit.

This program has the power to lift families out of poverty by reducing barriers to success. TANF is meant for families like mine. My children were enrolled in quality childcare once we were able to access it. I spent my time contacting supervisors at FedCap or seeking the help of Maine Equal Justice to get my childcare reinstated. I spent a great deal of my time fighting to keep benefits I needed to succeed. I struggled with a feeling of dread each time I went to the mailbox to find how they were trying to kick me off TANF each month.

It is highly unlikely that I will ever be on the TANF program again. I graduated May 8th 2021 with my Bachelors in Justice studies. I am no different from so many other women who find themselves on welfare. *Despite* Fedcap, I reached my goal. I made it, despite the monthly attempts to kick me off TANF before I was ready.

I do have suggestions for improving DHHS programs and I appreciate the opportunity to share them. I suggest that we reinterpret the STEP disregard program to be in favor of the families. I suggest that we streamline the access to childcare, car repairs and clothing. I am suggesting that pay stubs and phone call

check ins are sufficient when a recipient is enrolled in a degree program or working. There should be a means of holding DHHS accountable for every family that ends up back on the program within three years.

Thank you for considering my testimony.

September 1, 2021

Senator Claxton, Representative Meyers and members of the Health and Human Services Committee of the Maine legislature:

My name is Savannah Steiger and I live in Cherryfield. I have a 6 year old daughter and a 2 year old son. I am going to school for psychology and community studies and I work at Sunrise Opportunities as part of the Child Abuse Prevention Network. I applied for TANF last winter when things in my life got complicated. It took a lot to get on TANF in the first place. It was very inaccessible.

Busy work: With Fedcap you have to take this two week course, all day everyday. Both myself and my partner were required to attend. Sometimes people were zooming in from work (but were unable to stay in because the training was so demanding and interactive) I've done a lot of workforce training before (for example a three day workshop with vocational rehab) I tried to explain this to Fedcap but they require everyone to attend. It was so frustrating. I had two young children at home (one who was remote learning) and my partner was trying to work despite the lockdown. So my options were to put my kids in front of a television all day so I could try to participate in this training that I'd already done several variations of. Some of my fellow participants had masters degrees and were in between work- it didn't make any sense for them to be in this training either. I saw the benefit of it for people who hadn't done it; but those of us who had done workforce training it was frustrating, annoying and overwhelming. It also made me feel like I wasn't smart or good enough to get a job from my other trainings so I needed more. Why couldn't they tailor it to different audiences? We were made to feel like we were in first grade.

One of the things that was hardest for me was the way we were **treated by staff**. The language of staff really bothered me. We were made to feel stupid, and were scolded like children. I left the conversations feeling really bad about myself. I would get calls from someone to remind me to fill out different things and they would say "we can't give you this money for free" as if I wanted or was trying to take advantage of the system. All of those phone calls made me feel sick to my stomach. I could tell the caller meant well, she was trying to be nice and supportive but she needed a better way to do it. I also felt insecure because of all the information they wanted. My family was going through an emotional and stressful time and to continue to be asked very personal questions was extremely difficult. It made me feel like they thought I was lying. I felt like there was no regard for my feelings.

The other challenge was all the **paperwork** and the number of times they lost my paperwork. It felt like millions of forms to fill out and I had to share the details of my life over and over again. This is painful when you're already down and out. Fedcap would lose paperwork all the time and I'd be forced to fill it out again.

I was trying my best for my family but it was never good enough for them.

I would often wonder why TANF/ASPIRE can't be more like MaineCare or SNAP with a one year review? Or instead of the weekly requirements of paperwork making it monthly or anyway to simplify things? They also were very difficult to work with as self employed people (and many Mainers are self

employed) with extra steps making it even more confusing. Making it simpler for people could go a long way to building trust and connection rather than wasting people's time and belittling them. I have moved on but it's not because of any help from Fedcap. That period of time was time wasted for me it was so difficult and I felt so bad about myself that I decided not to continue on with TANF. It helped my family greatly monetarily but the way I felt emotionally and the stress wasn't worth the extra money.

They require goal setting with Fedcap and TANF- these goals were hard and unrealistic I felt. As a student parent I couldn't find a part time job because I had no childcare. It was also the start of lockdown and so it didn't feel safe to apply for jobs. My partner was working whenever possible but it still wasn't enough to help us stay above water. Fedcap did not help me reach my goals(that they made me set) it was a distraction from them(I wasn't able to do my school work at the quality I had previously done because I was so busy trying to do all things fedcap made me do). We need programs like ASPIRE. I just don't think Fedcap is the private entity to make this happen. Or if they are they need to some serious training in how to interact with people who need help. I'm a serious advocate for programs like ASPIRE. I want to see people succeed and live independently; having DHHS, Fedcap and all other programs over you head doesn't feel good; and it actually makes it harder to motivate. I want to see people use these programs and be helped by them. Not feel trapped and belittled.

Here is what I would recommend for future ASPIRE:

- please make it more accessible to people
- Please don't blame people for what is an organizational problem
- No more cookie cutter programs
- no mountains of paperwork,
- stop the overwhelming administrative requirements
- meet people where they are at, make sure the program is functionally accessible to people with reading challenges, disabilities and interpretation needs.

Testimony on the LIFT report
Health and Human Services Committee
September 1, 2021

Senator Claxton, Representative Meyer and members of the Health and Human Services Committee, my name is Carolyn McNamara and I am a Family Nurse Practitioner. I work for Community Clinical Services and St. Mary's in Lewiston but I want to be clear that I submit this testimony as an individual and I am not representing these institutions or the positions of my employer.

I see patients of all ages and genders and races in a community clinical setting. I work in one of the poorest census tracts in Maine and I am very concerned about the impact that poverty has had on my patients who face significant challenges to meeting their economic needs.

I am writing to share my experiences as a PCP with the ASPIRE program. I have been working with ASPIRE since 2012. At that time, DHHS administered the program. I remember our local ASPIRE workers in Lewiston and how easy it was to work with the program. They were friendly, professional and accessible. They knew the program. When ASPIRE was housed at DHHS, there was more of a culture of helping people and reducing barriers at that time.

My experience with Fedcap is that many Fedcap workers don't have the experience that DHHS caseworkers were expected to have and they don't know the law. They don't understand policies and procedures. They have been assigned to monitor and apply punishments and reach Fedcap's number goals to justify their existence. I have to prove to them, for example, that the patient who has to be on bedrest for pregnancy needs to focus on her and her baby's health and cannot fulfill her contract at this time. My staff will tell Fedcap that I as their PCP will send a letter excusing her. Fedcap says "we don't accept letters". Instead, they sent a huge packet to fill out. Another mother had a 2-year-old child who started to have seizures. The toddler needed to be monitored 24/7. We told her, if the seizure happens again, he needs to be treated immediately. She was told by Fedcap that she could work from home with her 2-year-old in tow doing something remotely. Fedcap told me, her and her child's PCP, that the child's seizure "probably will never happen again". The opinion of a client's medical provider is never enough.

What I see happening now is poor families are giving up on the program and

giving up TANF support because of how dehumanizing and punitive the program has become. Children actually aren't getting the benefits they deserve because it's literally not worth it to jump through the Fedcap hoops. Lost paperwork and bureaucracy and then after all that, people give up. This speaks volumes because these patients desperately need the help to get back on their feet. And where does someone turn when the safety net is unbearable? Do we want to see more people sex trafficked? More people turn to drugs? This is what people are pushed to do when they can't get help.

Fedcap's model is not what a support program was meant to do. It was created to make sure the poorest among us have the supports they need to work or sustain their family if they can't work. Please demonstrate compassion for people's lives. Continuing a contract with Fedcap will only hurt our economy and disrupt thousands of children's lives.



September 1, 2021

Testimony on the LIFT Report before the HHS Committee

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Senator Claxton, Representative Meyer and members of the Health and Human Services Committee, my name is Sally Sutton and I live in South Portland. I am the Program Coordinator of the New Mainers Resource Center at Portland Adult Education (PAE). In my role as Program Coordinator I have an opportunity on a daily basis to work with new Mainers who are foreign trained professionals who are seeking to re-start their lives and careers here in Maine.

The New Mainers Resource Center (NMRC) was created in 2013 by the Maine State Legislature to develop and execute a strategy to integrate and better utilize the skills of foreign trained immigrants living in Maine. Established as a pilot project at Portland Adult Education (PAE), **NMRC's mission is to support Maine's economic development by meeting employers' demands for a skilled and culturally diverse workforce.**

PAE has been supporting members of Maine's immigrant communities to find success and build financial stability through workforce development programs designed specifically for new Mainers, for over 13 years. The inclusion of NMRC at PAE has allowed for the development of both targeted programming focused on the unique needs of those who come to the U.S. with

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an advanced degree and experience in a professional field as well as support for workforce initiatives that are integrated throughout PAE's programs.

Maine is fortunate that the new Americans that come to Maine bring with them a wealth of training and skills that could be a tremendous benefit to the state and its workforce.

Unfortunately, in Portland new Mainers tend to be unemployed or underemployed at a higher rate than the mainstream population even though they may be highly educated and have extensive experience in high-demand fields including, engineering, teaching, healthcare and finance.

Foreign trained skilled professionals face many barriers as they seek to enter the Maine workforce. In addition to requiring an adequate level of English competency, these barriers include lack of information about career pathways, transferring foreign earned credentials, and US standards for resumes, interviews, and American workplace culture. In addition, they must navigate complicated vocational licensing systems and educational systems as well as combat employer misperception, discrimination and the loss of professional networks.

In order to put their prior training and experience to its fullest advantage, this population needs different types of support, otherwise they will languish, as we have seen, at the poverty level in minimum wage, part-time and/or temporary jobs.

Maine's government programs should help families move out of poverty. By recognizing both the unique potential as well as the needs of new Mainers and designing programs to meet those needs, not only will families be lifted out of poverty, but Maine will have a stronger workforce and economy overall.

Thank you for considering my testimony.

Sally Sutton, Program Coordinator
New Mainers Resource Center
suttos@portlandschools.org

The Committee on Health and Human Services
Testimony of Dana F. Connors representing the Maine State Chamber of Commerce, on the Maine Department of Health & Human Services' "Measures of Child and Family Economic Security for Families Participating in Maine's Public Assistance Programs" Report

September 1, 2021

Senator Claxton, Representative Meyer, and distinguished members of the Health and Human Services Committee, my name is Dana F. Connors. I am President / CEO for the Maine State Chamber of Commerce, which represents thousands of employers of all sizes and sectors across Maine. Thank you for the opportunity to share testimony on the Maine Department of Health & Human Services' recent report, "Measures of Child and Family Economic Security for Families Participating in Maine's Public Assistance Programs."

As background, in 2019 during the 129th Legislature, the Maine State Chamber testified in support of LD 1774, "An Act to Reduce Child Poverty by Leveraging Investments so Families Can Thrive," (LIFT). We were pleased LD 1774 was enacted, and today, wish to reiterate our support for the law and the annual report DHHS now provides on the economic security and well-being of Maine children and families. Understanding how well government programs to reduce poverty and create economic opportunities for Maine people are working is key to helping Maine people and Maine's economy thrive.

From a business standpoint, reducing poverty by connecting Maine people and families to education and employment opportunities, and making sure their basic needs are met, will help strengthen Maine's workforce and economy. The size and skill level of Maine's workforce have long been one of the biggest challenges Maine faces. This challenge has been exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic. Multiple efforts are required to solve this challenge. Knowing what is working well and where gaps lie in public programs addressing poverty, including those that aim to help educate and employ people, will help us better understand where more effort is needed, address those areas, and grow Maine's workforce and economy.

Understanding and resolving these gaps also will help meet several workforce goals identified both pre- and post-pandemic, including the 2020 Mills Administration's 10-year economic development strategy and the Governor's COVID-19 Economic Recovery Committee report, as well as the MaineSpark initiative launched in 2017. The Maine State Chamber is proud to be a leading member of MaineSpark, a coalition of schools and universities, nonprofits and foundations, government agencies and businesses, working together to achieve a common goal: by 2025, 60% of Mainers will hold education and workforce credentials that position Maine for success.

The Maine State Chamber has testified before that there is no singular solution to Maine's workforce challenges. The DHHS report before the Committee today is key to guiding and implementing strategies that improve programs aimed at removing barriers to education and employment. Paving pathways for all Mainers to achieve success will result in stronger Maine families, communities, employers, and continued economic growth. These pathways also can serve to advance opportunity and economic equity in Maine. Furthermore, the impact on economically-disadvantaged families can be generational. Parents who succeed also improve their children's chances of having a bright future.

As Maine's economy continues recovering from the COVID-19 pandemic, strengthening opportunities that connect Maine people to education and jobs is critical. The "Measures of Child and Family Economic Security for Families Participating in Maine's Public Assistance Program" report is an important tool to help guide and direct necessary adjustments that can be made so these programs work optimally.

When these programs work to their fullest potential, more Maine people, our business community, and Maine's economy will have the chance to do the same.

Thank you for the opportunity to provide testimony today, and to DHHS for their work providing this important report.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Dana F. Connors". The signature is written in a cursive style with a large, sweeping flourish at the end.

Dana F. Connors

Testimony of Shawn Yardley, Community Concepts, on DHHS' August 2021 Measures of Child and Family Economic Security for Families Participating in Maine's Public Assistance Programs Report
September 1, 2021

Senator Claxton, Representative Meyer, and members of the Committee on Health and Human Services – my name is Shawn Yardley, and I am the CEO of Community Concepts. I am here today on behalf of Community Concepts and as a member of the Invest in Tomorrow initiative. Thank you for the opportunity to testify on DHHS' August 2021 report: Measures of Child and Family Economic Security for Families Participating in Maine's Public Assistance Programs.

Community Concepts is a Community Action Agency serving Western Maine. Our mission is to strengthen individuals, families and communities in Western Maine by providing diverse programs, by engaging in strategic partnerships and through advocacy that addresses the barriers to promote economic opportunities for all.

Community Concepts is a proud member of the Invest in Tomorrow initiative, which started in 2017 when a diverse group of stakeholders came together to align our efforts toward the goal of increasing economic opportunity and ending child poverty in Maine. Through this initiative, we worked together to identify the primary contributing factors that are keeping families in poverty throughout the state. We also worked to identify broadly supported potential strategies for reducing child poverty and developed a dashboard to measure Maine's success when it comes to creating more economic opportunity for children and families. The initiative gathered input through child poverty forums, interviews with stakeholders statewide, focus groups with people impacted by poverty and with business leaders, and an online survey with over 180 respondents. Over 400 people participated in these activities and each person brought with them their experience, knowledge and passion for improving their communities. Many of the evidence-based strategies identified through this process informed the 2019 Invest in Tomorrow bill package – LIFT and STEP – which created the legislation behind the report you are seeing today.

The data presented in DHHS' August report supports our experience at Community Concepts, and points to the need for real reform at DHHS, particularly in the following areas:

- 1. Need to improve the ASPIRE program:** At Community Concepts, we see families working hard to stabilize their lives. We see the negative consequences first-hand of a program designed to steer participants into low-wage jobs, and the failure of Fedcap to administer the ASPIRE program in a way that actually helps people meet their goals and get good jobs. Barriers like this place families in a situation where they have few financial resources and limited options. This is born out by the data presented by DHHS today, which shows that a vast majority of families leaving TANF are still living in poverty.

With changes, TANF/ASPIRE could be a powerful tool to help families get by and get ahead, particularly as our state recovers economically from the pandemic. Education and training give parents receiving TANF the best chance to get and keep stable employment. The report from DHHS shows that unfortunately, very few families are actually being given these opportunities. We should be doing all we can to support families in accessing education and training opportunities through the ASPIRE program.

- 2. Need to improve the coordination of government programs like TANF, SNAP, and General Assistance, to help families get ahead.** Safety net programs should be simple, accessible, and well-coordinated so families living in poverty can access opportunity and sustain economic security, while at the same time, reducing inefficiencies in state government. People come to Community Concepts with a variety of needs that are often driven by gaps in these supports resulting from systemic issues make access difficult rather than due to lack of personal motivation. Having administered General Assistance for 9 years in Bangor, I repeatedly saw firsthand, the challenges people experienced in accessing services they were otherwise eligible for due to eligibility cliffs, administrative barriers including office hours and work requirements that created catch-22s and made benefit eligibility processes virtually a full-time job. Not because the applicant desired to “work the system” but because they were forced devote so much time to make the system work as it was intended- to provide eligible residents the benefits that could assist them as a bridge for their families to get ahead. I recall in one of our poverty forums, a gentleman who had been homeless, living in his car with 2 small children speaking up about the assistance he had received in the form of childcare and temporary housing support that allowed him to obtain employment and in short order he had basically reached self-sufficiency, independent of the majority of his public benefits. An unexpected flat tire led to a downward spiral that quickly led him back to homelessness. I believe better coordination of our government programs can and should serve the needs of our vulnerable families who live on the economic margins more effectively and thus make best use of our public dollars.
- 3. Need to create more accountability at DHHS to the people it serves.** People who know poverty firsthand should be at the table when decisions are being made at DHHS that impact them. People should have a chance to weigh in on how DHHS programs and services could be better administered to provide compassionate, trauma-informed, and culturally competent supports to the people DHHS serves. Not only is this fairer and more inclusive, but it would also make these programs more effective at getting positive results.

These changes would help Maine families achieve greater economic security and opportunity, and at the same time, strengthen our current and future workforce.

Thank you for your time and attention today. I would be happy to take any questions.

Testimony for LIFT-Robyn Stanicki

Good morning Senator Claxton, Rep. Meyer and esteemed members of the HHS Committee.

My name is Rebyl and I was a third-year student in the UM Social Work program when I heard about the Lift Initiative. I was working on a paper which identified ways to serve non-traditional students and trying to weave a social justice, trauma-informed lens to designing and improving welfare systems. I proposed serving parents with a program that worked more easily with the complexity of kids and college while dealing with the realities of being a low-income family. That was me.

I had spent years in foster care and had been chronically homeless in my late teens and early adulthood, and try as I may, I couldn't get out of my own way. I spent 15 years trying to go to college.

I knew I qualified for the Competitive Skills Scholarship program at DOL but It took me 3 years on the wait list to enroll. I was eligible by walking a narrow path between qualifying for food stamps but not qualifying for TANF/ASPIRE because the CSSP, with tuition, supplies, transportation, medical, clothing, and emergency benefits was a better program by FAR.

If you don't know, Students on TANF cannot enroll in CSSP and are forced into the ASPIRE program which has a lot of barriers, attitudes, paperwork and meetings to add to an already hectic schedule. It takes hours to get through on the phone to get anything, and makes you feel like a lesser person.

In 2018, I testified in the HHS committee to share that very few programs adequately served my needs, and that I had to cobble several programs together using small-print loopholes to make it work. I felt like I was in more control of my future, with the wind at my back, rather than hoops to jump through and gates to unlock. I could call my OWN CASEWORKER with any issues, and he would answer the phone every time.

I left the Program with two degrees and acceptance to a Masters program. My goal was to specifically address the needs of students like myself that struggled to meet long range goals. The connection between trauma and success is so profound that without support I failed graduate school not once, but three times, and had to convince them to let me stay. I was unprepared for that first year which is all about examining your own identity and where you come from, Instead, I hit that familiar wall-hard-again and again.

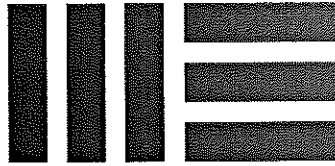
Fast forward: where am I now? I have been LIFTED. During the Pandemic, I was resilient. I just bought a house. I got a better job. I'll make more money in 2021 than I have in the last 10 YEARS, and I haven't looked back. I am in the driver's seat. I am working on getting healthy! I work as a Community Planner focused on Public Health and focus on the importance of addressing the Social Determinants of Health-like housing, food insecurity, and economic

justice. If we leverage and divert more of our efforts to these priorities, I'll have more colleagues with lived experience to help LIFT others up and out of poverty, to get out of our own way, and on our way.

Thank you for your time.

Robyn Stanicki

Unity, ME



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Moriah Geer
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Good morning Senator Claxton, Representative Meyer, and members of the Committee on Health and Human Services. My name is Moriah Geer, and I am the Moxie Case Coach at Maine Equal Justice. We are a nonprofit civil legal aid organization working to increase economic security, opportunity, and equity for people in Maine. Thank you for the opportunity to testify on DHHS' August 2021 report: Measures of Child and Family Economic Security for Families Participating in Maine's Public Assistance Programs.

In my position at Maine Equal Justice, I work directly with individuals who contact us looking for help in navigating Maine's often complicated and confusing public benefits system. I have had to make use of many of the programs myself, so I have first-hand experience dealing with the frustrations faced by the people who use this program, and understand how to help empower them with the knowledge they need to advocate for themselves. As a result of my experiences and education I am also well situated to assist them with direct advocacy when needed. We provide direct advocacy and assistance around all of the programs that the Office of Family Independence administers, but the program that our clients often need the most assistance with is ASPIRE. A great deal of my time is spent listening to the struggles of people who have to work with Fedcap and strategizing with them to come up with a plan to make things better. We have worked with nearly 150 Fedcap clients in recent years. Among these cases, there are people from all walks of life trying to make a better life for their families: single moms, people from every corner of the state, immigrants, people with disabilities, the full diversity of the Maine we love. I've been lucky to get to know quite a few of them on their journey, to be able to listen to their stories and let them know that they are not alone. I'm here today to share some of their stories and the things that we have learned from them, to help illustrate the deep and I believe irreparable problems with the way that Fedcap is running the ASPIRE program and the harm that they have caused to our fellow Mainers over their four years in our state.

First, Fedcap is not actually helping to make people's lives better. The number of people who move off of the program due to employment is dismally low and what I hear from my clients who do find work is that they have mostly found those jobs in spite of Fedcap, and not because of them. The numbers of people who have attained higher education or training that could lead to better paying or more stable employment are even worse. I often talk to my clients about higher education because that was my own pathway out of poverty and the assistance that I received from ASPIRE was instrumental in my success. I am appalled at how many of my clients have no idea that they could get help from Fedcap for college or training programs. Even more appalling are the stories that I hear from clients who do try to pursue education. They are told that college isn't for them, that it's too hard, that there are wait lists to get into the programs

designed to help them or even outright lied to and told that education activities are not part of the ASPIRE program at all. I was contacted one day by a nursing student with a toddler who was taking 18 credit hours but who told me that she was considering dropping out. The reason? It wasn't because school was too hard or because her toddler needed her- it was because Fedcap told her that they couldn't count her class hours and that she would have to do an additional 30 hours of participation on top of her classes. I have had dozens of variations on that call since then, people who desperately want to pursue education and better their lives but who have barriers placed in front of them by Fedcap at every turn. Some TANF recipients come to the program without a high school diploma and want to work on attaining their GED, but even that is often not supported by Fedcap. I have a client in that situation who was not given the chance to work on her GED until we got involved. Whenever she tried to talk to her Fedcap worker about that goal that would switch the subject back to placing her at a volunteer site so that she could gain work experience. Work readiness is important, but the types of jobs that our TANF parents will get without even the most basic education are not likely to be jobs that lift their families out of poverty.

The numbers in the report reflect the terrible job that Fedcap is doing with employment and education, but there is an important issue for many TANF recipients that is more difficult to codify in numbers. Not everyone who goes on TANF will be ready to enter the workforce or an education track right away. Most people in poverty have experienced a lot of trauma and they may have some work to do before they are ready to participate in the workforce, and some of them may never be ready. Domestic violence, mental health disorders, substance use disorders and other disabilities are all things that may be faced by individuals getting help from the TANF program. Fedcap is doing a terrible job with this population of people too. I have a client with four children who went on TANF nearly five years ago after leaving a very abusive marriage. The last four years have been one battle with Fedcap after another. She and her children need intensive mental health treatment to move past their trauma, but that is not supported and instead she is constantly threatened and belittled by Fedcap for not doing enough. When she reaches her 60 month TANF time limit she will have no other source of income, and she can't get this time back. She is no closer to self-sufficiency than she was when she first entered the program. Instead of helping, Fedcap has made her life miserable for four years and soon she will have missed any opportunity to make use of the ASPIRE program to move ahead.

Not only has Fedcap not helped to move people forward and make their lives better, in many ways they are setting people back and making their lives worse. I've been working with someone recently who is in recovery from a substance use disorder. When she first went on TANF she was very new to recovery and had a toddler at home. She was exempt from participation so that she could take some time to work on herself, which made sense. Unfortunately, after some time her case was transferred to a new Fedcap worker. She was told that she had to put her child in daycare and start work search within the week or she would lose her TANF. It was very traumatizing for her and her child. She eventually enrolled in an associate's degree program, but while in school Fedcap made things so complicated and difficult for her that she tells me that at one point she relapsed into substance use because of

the requirements they were placing on her that were just too much. I have had multiple clients tell me that their interactions with Fedcap caused them to need to seek mental health treatment or to increase the treatment and medication they were already receiving. I have also heard from clients who put themselves into unhealthy or unsafe situations because of Fedcap. I have a client who recently started to date her abusive ex-husband again because she was desperate to get a job and get off of TANF and that was the only way that she could get him to watch their child. He has not changed and eventually he beat her again. He's not in prison and she had to quit the job that she'd been counting on to get her off of TANF. The way that Fedcap interacts with people is harmful, it's traumatizing, and it puts people into positions where they are often worse off than they were before they started the program. As our state moves forward with improving our workforce and attracting new people, it would be a tragedy if we left behind the potential workforce of low-income parents who are already here. As a state we are already spending a lot of money and a lot of time and a lot of people power on these programs, but the numbers tell us that these programs are not currently making a difference or meeting the need. We need to do better for these parents, for these children, and for our entire communities.

Brittany Carter

Testimony to the Health and Human Services Committee

Senator Claxton, Representative Meyers and members of the Health and Human Services Committee, my name is Brittany Carter and I am a former participant in the TANF/ASPIRE program.

I participated in the Parents as Scholars program and it was a lot to manage school, an internship, and the complex needs for myself and my kids. I worked to arrange child care for kids at 2 different places and with their grandmother with complex transportation arrangements; yet Fedcap delayed requesting support services despite meeting participation requirements. They were just confused by the complexity of the solution. When I was a participant, Fedcap added stress and difficulty to an already stressful and difficult situation.

I was very discouraged by the lack of confidentiality in the offices particularly regarding clients and staff talking about clients in front of other clients. Now that I work in social services, I take an oath of confidentiality very seriously, especially when working with high-risk populations. I was never given this courtesy, let alone right.

Good cause was also a perennial issue for me. When I came with what I understand to be good cause for missing hours, I was told it's for reasons like not having child care for numerous weeks or months. But in the rules, it states otherwise. Fedcap staff should understand what the rules are.

I'm in the Parents as Scholars program and my children's appointments are not allowed to be consider excused time. That doesn't make sense. Information about programs continuously changes. Also, I have witnessed a problem in how staff speaks to clients, specifically regarding staff being rude towards clients, staff giving rude remarks, staff giving unreasonable tasks given the clients' personal environment and situations. I've personally witnessed staff talking down towards clients.

Everyone has a story and poverty isn't a choice. Clients shouldn't be treated like second class citizens in the ASPIRE program. We should work towards empowerment, building clients up, helping them find a job that they will love - something that they can make a career out of.

Often, I feel I got off TANF despite Fedcap and all the barriers they put in my way. That is a backwards way of running this program meant to help people.

Testimony of Adrienne Cook

Health and Human Services Committee

September 1, 2021

Senator Claxton, Representative Meyers and members of the committee: My name is Adrienne Cook and I live in Dexter. I am a young mom and a student. I am the caretaker for 2 children, ages 8 and 6. One is my biological son and one is my nephew.

I recently got a job at Hannaford to help make ends meet but my real dream is to become a librarian in a small town like mine.

I have been receiving help as part of the State of Emergency Pandemic Services. Once the State of Emergency lifted, I wasn't eligible for any TANF extensions. But I've lost time in the past couple years because of the direction Fedcap brought me in. I feel they directed me away from my goals for two semesters and I feel like I lost time towards my goal of becoming a librarian. I am very upset about this. I was discouraged from going to school for library sciences because they said I should major in something that has a better job outlook. So for two semesters, and thousands of dollars in loans, I took their advice. But it wasn't what I want to do with my life and I knew that. I felt pushed into the change instead of helped to find my path.

I feel like I don't have this time to waste. I have a lot going on with my two kids who have high medical needs. My son has diabetes and was in a diabetic coma for a week after being misdiagnosed. Both kids have mental health needs given what they've been through in their lives. We are currently living with my son's grandparents and they are currently facing bankruptcy. There is a lot going on for us and I need support services that help me get on my feet and reach my goals in a really challenging time.

In light of these personal struggles, the drama of Fedcap was too much to take. I felt like I was fighting with Fedcap over my degree instead of getting encouragement and support. I changed my major to case management at their suggestion even though that is not the work I wanted to do and my grades immediately started to fall. I ended up leaving school as a result and the pandemic made it difficult to get back to school. Being home with the kids through the pandemic was a struggle. Fedcap expects you to actively look for work on top of caring for your kids and 40 hrs. a week of school, not all of which count towards your Fedcap participation hours.

I feel Fedcap demands are unrealistic for low income families like mine who are juggling so much. Fedcap makes things a lot harder with their expectations. I was made to do 40 hours on top of school, filling out Fedcap academy packets. It was more than I could handle and it hurt my studies. It also affected my ability to be there for my kids who needed a lot of support in the pandemic with remote schooling. Up until recently, Fedcap didn't count helping your kids with remote schooling as participation hours. They really mishandled the pandemic.

They also said they'd help me find work but they dropped the ball. I found the job at Hannaford with the help of my DHHS case manager, not my Fedcap worker. If I hadn't found this job, my TANF would have ended anyway and I would have had absolutely no income.

I tried to do Parents as Scholars but I couldn't stay on when I changed my major at Fedcap's request and my grades suffered. Under the State of Emergency Pandemic services, I was told I couldn't do Parents as Scholars.

I feel if I had stayed the course with library science, my grades wouldn't have gone down and I would've stayed on Parents as Scholars. I wouldn't have lost my financial aid and would be further along towards my goals. I often thought with Fedcap "What's the point to continue?" We need a

change in the kinds of supports low income families receive. Working with Fedcap set me back a lot.

Thank you for listening.

Delora Henderson
Family Child Care Provider in Augusta

I have two families who work with Fedcap right now.

I want to give you a statement about the reality for childcare providers who have to work with Fedcap.

I did not get paid this week from either family due to someone at Fedcap not doing a contract in a timely manner. I could easily say to these families, I never have or would I, that I can't take care of your children next week because I didn't get paid by Fedcap because I can't afford groceries this week.

I just want you to know that I have run across this before. I get paid once a month because everything is so late and behind with Fedcap.

This is the reality for daycare providers that rely on Fedcap payment. When somebody at Fedcap doesn't do things in a timely manner, it has a huge impact on families and the local businesses they support.

Allina Diaz

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Testimony to the Health and Human Services Committee

September 1, 2021

Senator Claxton, Representative Meyers and members of the Health and Human Services Committee, good morning. My name is Allina Diaz and I'm here to share my experiences with the DHHS programs you just heard about. I was helped to get my degree through the Parents as Scholars program and finished as a Justice Studies major at the University of Maine at Augusta in the spring. I am the single mom to three daughters. My oldest, Lilly is 13, Annabelle is 10, and my youngest is Journey who is 6 years old. My life is proof of the positive impact education can have for parents in poverty, and especially for their children.

Education has transformed my life; I've gained purpose, direction, confidence, and hope as the result of my time studying at UMA. I'm looking forward to being on a path to financial independence and being active in my community.

But getting my education has come with very real challenges that I don't want other parents to go through.

Although Parents as Scholars aims to help families just like mine, I have found myself battling against a system that has resisted my desire for an education at every turn. When I enrolled in TANF I wasn't told about the PAS program and lost time and money, even though I was eligible for those supports. Even when I asked my Fedcap worker about PAS, I was discouraged by them. I should have been offered the opportunity to join PAS when I started school. The numbers prove I'm not alone: at its height, the program had 1,200 participants but today there are only 20. We can do so much more to make this program accessible to low-income parents. Parents like me really benefit from more mentorship and chances for people to hear about the program and enroll.

While I was able to successfully navigate the systems through self-advocacy and enlisting help from outside, others who have additional barriers may not be able to do that. The treatment I received by some Fedcap workers was demeaning. And I often found that Fedcap, while they expect perfection from participants, isn't following through with the support needed to comply. They would be late in paying for my childcare, made mistakes on my transportation support, made it very

difficult to get good cause so I can be present to my child with special needs, and many Fedcap workers don't have an understanding of the rules of the program.

I remember one semester I asked about help for books, and I was told by Fedcap workers that "there's a new rule and we don't cover books anymore." While there may be a question of whether I was eligible for this help at this time, this was not accurate. I should have been given an accurate, written explanation of the reason for supporting or denying her request for services. I have received confusing and, at times, inaccurate information about what support services are available. One semester, I reached out to Stacy Reynolds who works at DHHS and was the ASPIRE Regional Planner, so that I could get help paying for required books because I was hitting a brick wall with Fedcap. **Let that sink in: I had to bypass Fedcap to meet my needs.** I've heard this from other participants, that we end up going to DHHS even though Fedcap has the contract.

Families need accessible supports and transitional benefits to get through what life is like when you're getting on your feet. The hardest time for me was in March of 2018, when my daughters lost their father to an opioid overdose. While dealing with the trauma of this death in our family, I almost lost the assistance that was helping me hold things together during a very difficult time. I was able to fight to stay in Parents as Scholars, but I lost all of my financial grant, leaving me in a worse financial position as I was before gaining death benefits.

This was a terrifying situation for me, realizing circumstances beyond my control could strip me of all the supports that were making it possible for me to obtain the degree that I have been working so hard to earn. For years, I lived in fear of losing my benefits when social security goes up, or if I want to work a few extra hours.

I grew up in a small town in Maine, and like many of the kids around me, our families were more focused on getting enough to eat and buying oil than on encouraging us children to get an education. As I grew into an adult and parent, I found myself constantly worried about the same issues, riddled with stress over finances. With little hope, I turned to substance use to calm my pain, as did many of my peers.

Recovery is a big part of my story as well as my decision to enroll in college. Recovery is a journey. People struggling with substance use disorder are incredibly vulnerable during their early recovery. I worry about other participants who may not be able to effectively advocate for themselves through this struggle. As I

interact with my community, especially young parents, I see so much untapped potential. Offering easier access to education and improving these life-changing programs is essential to the growth of Maine. I see strong women and men making major changes in their lives, graduating and breaking the cycle of poverty. At the graduation ceremonies at Rockland Center of UMA, the majority of the people walking that stage were single moms who have overcome so many barriers—who have fought hard to get their families to a better position.

These are the families facing systemic barriers and are looking for the support of our community, our state government, knowing that no one can do it alone. I know I have supports all around me, and a system put together to carry me through as I look for employment that pays enough to meet my family's needs. Our state has many hard working, smart and capable people who are asking for a better system, to help them fulfil their potential and ensure their kids have a brighter future.

Thank you.

Senator Claxton, Representative Meyer and members of the Health and Human Services Committee, my name is Lisa Markushewski and I work as a case manager for immigrant families at Greater Portland Family Promise. I am urging you not to renew the state's contract with Fedcap, the administrator of Maine's ASPIRE program. The Fedcap staff lack autonomy to develop individualized programs that work for individual families and which can be tailored to their local community. Some of our clients who hold advanced degrees and are fluent in English are working in cleaning jobs because they were urged by Fedcap staff to take the first job available. They weren't informed of support services that could help with advanced degree accreditation. Clients with low literacy skills were sanctioned because they could not participate in required remote learning workshops, or they misunderstood the work participation requirements. Clients weren't provided information about getting a drivers license through drivers ed programs so they could find higher paying jobs. The required Fedcap workshops are culturally insensitive and not tailored to their local community. The constant staff turnover at Fedcap makes it difficult for people to reach the office and the training provided to staff is minimal. As a result of all this dysfunction, it is the TANF recipients who are impacted the most, and undercuts our state's economy. I urge you to look into more productive ways to administer the state's ASPIRE program which allows for more local autonomy. Thank you for your time.

My name is Nicole Rust and I live in Orrington.

I am a full time student at UMA Bangor studying law. I am here to testify about my experiences with DHHS and the TANF/ASPIRE program in the hopes that we can work together to make meaningful changes to these programs for Maine families in poverty. I also work with the TRIO program at UMA Bangor so I am often supporting other low income and first generation students as they navigate various support systems and try to stay afloat.

I see a need for simpler, more accessible supports and services for families living in poverty. I see the need to address unnecessary and unacceptable harm by Fedcap and the way Fedcap administers the ASPIRE program. And I see a need for more compassionate, empathetic treatment of clients at DHHS, with DHHS seeing us as partners in our own success. We can learn a lot about the changes that are urgently needed by looking at what works and what doesn't.

When I first started participating with Fedcap, I was struck by how little Fedcap workers knew about the program. I would print out the statute and program rules, take them along with me to the meetings with my Fedcap worker and give them to her. It wasn't her fault she didn't know all the rules. The Fedcap organization does a really bad job training their people. No wonder they have so much turnover. I am currently on my 6th Fedcap worker. As a result, I struggled with the lack of consistency. It's hard to have to rehash everything about your situation every six months as you're trying to move on with your own life.

During the time I've dealt with Fedcap, I also worry about the harm and trauma experienced by those who work with them. It's not just one worker, it's the way Fedcap is run. I've seen so many participants leave in tears and I've been there too. I felt belittled and everything else. Some TRIO participants I work with would come in crying talking to my boss or their boss asking for help. They would tell us that Fedcap was refusing services and it's not right. I had so much experience myself that I offered to go with them to talk with their workers. I try to advocate a lot for our students. I know what it's like. I was doing the work that Fedcap should be doing - providing encouragement, support, empathy and helping people towards their goals in very concrete ways.

In addition to feeling like Fedcap was ineffective and sometimes downright cruel, I was very concerned by the lack of privacy and confidentiality at the offices. We are sharing very personal things - like you would if you were talking about your health - and we deserve privacy.

I also had to fight so hard to get the basics of the program, like assistance for books & school supplies. I was given assistance for my books and school supplies for the first three semesters but I was then denied. They'll find the smallest little thing to deny people things. It felt like a barrier was put up in front of me at every turn and I couldn't meet the excessive requirements. The turn around for help with Fedcap also takes so much time because Fedcap is like the middle man. Sometimes, I would just go straight to DHHS to get the help I needed and it would be a 24 hr turn around. Why do we need Fedcap then?

Transportation is another huge issue for families living on the edge. Often times we can't afford a working car and we don't have the credit to get a loan. My only transportation for a long time was my mother's car. Fedcap approved assistance for one-third of the registration because two other people were on the registration. I couldn't drive a car that is $\frac{1}{3}$ fixed. I couldn't get them to approve summer tires and so I drove the vehicle with studded winter tires. I feared being ticketed for this and I cannot afford the fine. Working Cars for Working Families was a program I was very interested in working to get passed. We worked on this bill and it was supposed to be implemented. We want to be able to trust the process but then we work with policymakers so we can better meet our needs but programs aren't implemented, even when a law is passed. Why hasn't that program been made available to low income families in desperate need of transportation? So many of us have gone into considerable debt to get a vehicle.

Fedcap was not understanding when it comes to parenting children with special needs. They just expected you, on top of everything else, to make it work even when your child is in crisis. My son was diagnosed with autism and ODD. I was taking 12 credits over the summer but FedCap wanted me to participate in job seeking activities and hiring events in addition to my school credits to make up additional hours. I asked for Good Cause due to my son's new diagnosis and was denied.

Working with Fedcap has seriously affected my mental health. My fedcap worker included a requirement in my Family Contract that required me to document up to 12 hours a week of mental health work. While this may have come from good intentions, they were not qualified to assess my mental health and what I needed. I was doing 13 credits and also work study of between 12 and 16 hours a week so I was often meeting the 40 hr a week requirement with those two things alone. The 12 hours of documentation of mental health work was an unnecessary burden and not based on any medical evidence. It actually contributed to my stress and anxiety.

I share all this because it should be the mission of DHHS to make things easier, not harder. Please work with us, those who are living this every day, to create programs that really work, save the state money and don't cause more harm.

