

Senator Richard A. Bennett
3 State House Station
Augusta, ME 04333-0003
Office (207) 287-1505
Cell (207) 592-3200

Richard.Bennett@legislature.maine.gov

Testimony on LD 3
by Senator Rick Bennett
December 21, 2022

President Jackson, Speaker Talbot Ross and Members of the Committee:

I am Senator Rick Bennett from Oxford, Maine, and I have the honor of serving 14 towns in western Maine in the Maine Senate. I am here to speak in favor of LD 3 and, along with my colleague Senator Nicole Grohoski, to offer important changes to the bill. I am grateful for your scheduling this extraordinary public hearing so that the impacts of this bill may be better known and considered.

Many of our neighbors are in urgent need of heating and housing relief, and I believe it is our duty to both help and act responsibly with state funds.

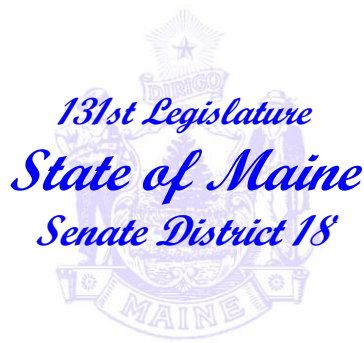
I have heard from many of the people I represent who believe that the emergency relief ought to be targeted to those in need. Furthermore, many Maine families have emergencies that are not energy related. Spending our surplus accounts dry leaves no money to deal with other pressing issues including but not limited to our opioid epidemic, our failing nursing homes, and the dire shortage of direct care workers for people who have been promised services.

I want to thank my colleague Sen. Grohoski, who worked with me to propose an alternative approach that seeks to address these concerns. She is here to discuss in detail our proposal and its rationale for more targeted relief checks. I will address our concerns over total cost of the bill, including other priorities and the framework for our proposed amendment.

Our proposed amendment:

- Targets meaningful relief on a sliding scale to people facing a high energy burden, based on data;
- Leaves the windfall from federal Medicaid money untouched to serve chronic funding shortfalls in needed programs;
- Reduces total cost of checks by nearly 50% to \$210M;
- Provides up to \$1,200 per family in funds to those in need who are not eligible for check program or don't qualify for LIHEAP; and
- Encourages energy efficiency through education and incentives for long-term benefit.

As indicated an important part of our approach is to better target the direct relief checks to leave untouched the roughly \$160 million in Federal Medical Assistance Percentage (FMAP) funds so they may assist the needs they are intended for – such as mental health, nursing homes, developmental services, and services for brain injured.



Senator Richard A. Bennett
3 State House Station
Augusta, ME 04333-0003
Office (207) 287-1505
Cell (207) 592-3200

Richard.Bennett@legislature.maine.gov

Like most other legislators, for years I have heard from families in crisis in our district who have suffered from chronic underfunding of these programs and the low compensation rates for direct support professionals that have made it difficult to recruit people for these challenging jobs. This has created emergency situations, often exacerbated by the stresses of the pandemic.

Here is one of many messages I have received about the importance of not deallocating the FMAP money:

"Thank you especially for proposing that LD 1 drop the deappropriation from Maine Care-funded home and community-based services (HCBS) for adult Mainers with disabilities (Maine Care sections 21, 29, 18, and 20 for adults with autism, intellectual disability, brain injury, and other related conditions).

"I understand that, from the governor's point of view, federal FMAP contribution to Maine Care goes up and goes down, and the state appropriates or deappropriates general fund money in the state budget to cover the balance. But if the federal FMAP had gone down, I'm pretty sure that the governor's LD 1 proposal wouldn't have tried to fill that hole--that would've been deferred to a budget bill. So when federal FMAP goes up, LD 1 shouldn't take advantage of that to lower apparent cost of sending \$ out for heating--because that would be sending \$ out on the backs of Mainers with disabilities

"Mainers with disabilities have endured years-long wait lists because of inadequate funding from the state. And even Mainers with disabilities who aren't on wait lists sometimes go without support because underfunding MaineCare causes direct support professional wages to be uncompetitive in today's labor market.

"My own son, who is on the Section 21 HCBS waiver, went SEVEN MONTHS without a SINGLE HOUR of HCBS-funded support."

LD 3 has impacts beyond the energy emergency many Mainers are facing. The bill before you proposes to spend all available surplus at the very beginning of a difficult winter and a challenging legislative session, where other needs will present themselves, some known like the one I cite, and some unknown. Thank you.