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May 5, 2023

Re: LD 1426, An Act to Secure Housing for the Most Vulnerable Maine Residents by Amending the Laws Governing Municipal General Assistance, and LD 1732, An Act to Expand the General Assistance Program

Senator Baldacci, Representative Meyer, and members of the Health and Human Services Committee, my name is Cullen Ryan, and I am the Executive Director of Community Housing of Maine (CHOM). CHOM houses Maine's most vulnerable people and advocates on behalf of these broader populations. I am a member of the Statewide Homeless Council and also chair the Maine Homeless Policy Committee and the Maine Continuum of Care Board of Directors.

My testimony is in support of LD 1426, An Act to Secure Housing for the Most Vulnerable Maine Residents by Amending the Laws Governing Municipal General Assistance, and LD 1732, An Act to Expand the General Assistance Program. These bills would both make a number of changes to the General Assistance (GA) program.

LD 1426:

1. Requires an overseer, no later than the 120th day following appointment or election, to complete training on the requirements of the municipal GA program;
2. Replaces, for determining the maximum level of assistance, the fair market value determination with setting the assistance at the equivalent amount of rental assistance provided for tenant-based housing choice vouchers under Section 8 of the United States Housing Act of 1937 except that the benefit level may not be less than the difference between the applicant's income and 110% of the area's fair market rent;
3. Provides that if GA is being used to pay rent for an applicant whose rent is subject to a lease an overseer may redetermine the applicant's eligibility annually;
4. Increases from 70% to 90% the amount of state reimbursement for the costs of GA incurred by a municipality and each Indian tribe;
5. Directs the Department of Health and Human Services (DHHS) to reimburse each municipality for 5% of the direct costs of paying benefits incurred through its GA program;
6. Directs DHHS to establish and provide overseers with access to a statewide database for tracking applicants for the GA program and expenses relating to the program; and
7. Requires DHHS to provide assistance to municipalities with regard to processing applications for the GA program and directs the Department to establish a hotline that is available 24 hours per day in order to provide consistent, accurate advice to overseers. It also requires the department to respond to requests for assistance within 24 hours.

LD 1732:

1. Requires overseers and designated or appointed municipal officials administering the program to complete training within 120 days of election or appointment;
2. Requires municipalities to accept applications for general assistance during regular business hours;
3. Amends provisions governing the municipality of responsibility to increase the provision of assistance from 30 days to 6 months when a municipality assists an applicant in relocating to another community and from 6 months to 12 months when an applicant is residing in a group home, shelter, rehabilitation center, nursing home or hospital or in a hotel, motel or other temporary housing;
4. Increases, from 70% to 90%, the amount of state reimbursement for the costs of general assistance incurred by each municipality and Indian tribe. It also provides that, if a municipality elects to determine need without consideration of funds from a municipally controlled trust, the State is required to reimburse the municipality for 2/3% of the amount in excess of expenditures;
5. Provides state reimbursement for additional program costs, including emergency general assistance, temporary housing, interpreter services and administrative expenses; and
6. Requires the Department of Health and Human Services to provide the services necessary to support municipalities, including education and training for certain state employees, 24-hour technical assistance, written decisions and a database.

Both of these bills would ensure there is an adequate safety net through common sense changes to the GA program. These bills improve and streamline GA laws/policies to remove barriers and simplify access/use specifically for housing.



LD 1426 and LD 1732 would both improve GA law by making it easier to read, interpret, and follow, with special emphasis on emergency assistance and 24-hour access. Additional training is also included which would ensure GA is more accurately understood. The bills would ensure there is consistent enforcement of GA policies. These bills also importantly increase the presumptive eligibility period, which is of particular importance for housing assistance.

GA administration varies greatly throughout Maine. These bills would improve uniformity across the state, make it more equitable, and create a reasonable rate of State reimbursement for GA costs borne by municipalities. And this bill would solve many programmatic inconsistencies, improving our system of care and our safety net for Maine's most vulnerable people.

General assistance is Maine's safety net of last resort. It protects thousands of Mainers by keeping a roof over their heads when they have nowhere else to turn. We will all be better for having an improved General Assistance program in Maine. People would be better served by their local GA programs if these bills pass.

Thank you for the opportunity to comment.