



# BANGOR CITY COUNCIL

CITY OF BANGOR

## **Joint Standing Committee on Health and Human Services Testimony in Support of LD 1732 – “An Act to Expand the General Assistance Program”**

April 25, 2023

Senator Baldacci, Representative Meyer, and distinguished members of the Joint Standing Committee on Health and Human Services. My name is Deborah Laurie, Bangor City Manager, and I’m providing testimony on behalf of the Bangor City Council in support of LD 1732, An Act to Expand the General Assistance Program.

As Maine’s third largest city and a service center community, we have a robust General Assistance program. In the past five years, our program has served over 2,100 households with total expenditures of \$5,659,522. These numbers are actually a bit deceiving as our caseload decreased significantly during the two plus years our clients were eligible for COVID rent relief. Now that those funds have been depleted, our caseload is rising rapidly, and we have replaced a retiring part-time caseworker with a full time one. In addition to our traditional clients, we are beginning to see more immigrant households. While these individuals and families bring welcomed diversity to our community, they tax the GA program not only in terms of benefits received but also in administrative costs such as interpreters and the increased caseworker time required to process their applications.

General Assistance programs in Maine are as different as the communities they serve. Despite the fact GA statute and ordinance are in place to guide programs, there is wide variance in how and when municipalities determine eligibility and grant benefits. This is due in part to a lack of required training for GA administrators and also a lack of consistent oversight from the State. LD 1732 will require that all GA administrators complete a training program within 120 days of hire and accept applications during regular business hours. It will also require that DHHS provide technical assistance to municipal GA programs 24 hours per day. This is critical as GA programs are required by law to accept applications 24 hours per day, and quick clarification from the state on complex issues during non-business hours is of the utmost importance. It is not only important that municipalities get answers to their questions, but also that those answers reference GA statute, thereby making communications with clients easier. These two elements can help ensure all Maine residents have fair and reasonable access to General Assistance regardless of their municipality of residence.

LD 1732 makes much needed changes to the rules regarding the municipality of responsibility. As a service center community, we are all too familiar with the practice of moving, or in many cases abandoning, individuals from across Maine in Bangor. This is unfair not only to the individual or family being moved but also to the taxpayers who carry the burden of GA costs. This problem has become even more pronounced as an increasing number of households are being placed in hotels. It is only fair that a municipality that moves an individual or family be responsible for their GA costs for 6 or 12 months

GA expenditures for both benefits and program administration are on the rise in Bangor and other service center communities. In FY '22, the City of Bangor awarded \$475,852 in GA benefits and was reimbursed \$333,096 by the State. That left Bangor taxpayers responsible for \$142,756. It is unfair to expect the residents of high-need, service center communities to pay such a large share of the regional and statewide cost of General Assistance. Raising the reimbursement rate to 90% and adding a 5% reimbursement for the direct cost of program administration will make GA a more equitable program for all municipalities.

Finally, GA administrators currently lack the ability to communicate with other GA administrators via a database in order to track services provided or other referrals/interventions surrounding the individuals and families seen in our offices. This puts us behind other state services such as vehicle registration and MaineCare and often leads to a more complicated use of administrator and client time as information required to determine eligibility is tracked down via phone and email. The creation of a statewide General Assistance database that interfaces with other state service providers will enhance our level of care to both our clients as well as stewardship of resources.

Bangor has been and continues to be committed to our citizens in need of General Assistance. We believe, however, that the program can be run more equitably and efficiently if the above mentioned changes are enacted. Therefore, with the full support of the Bangor City Council, I urge you to pass LD 1732.

Thank you for your consideration. Please do not hesitate to reach out with questions.

Deborah Laurie, City Manager, [debbie.laurie@bangormaine.gov](mailto:debbie.laurie@bangormaine.gov)  
Courtney O'Donnell, Assistant City Manager/ Director of Human Resources,  
[courtney.odonnell@bangormaine.gov](mailto:courtney.odonnell@bangormaine.gov)  
Richard Fournier, City Council Chair, [richard.fournier@bangormaine.gov](mailto:richard.fournier@bangormaine.gov)