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As a young person growing up in rural poverty, I remember my mother paying with paper food stamps at the store. The colorful coupons looked like Monopoly Money and I thought they were cool as a small person. It was pretty money, at the time, I didn't understand the difference.

Yet, that pretty money came with an ugly side. A stigma that exists today, that people in poverty need to boot strap, not have so many children, make different choices, pick your poison. The looks and judgment that people would give as they waited in line behind us, my mother sorting through WIC coupons so we could get cereal, bread, and eggs. I remember sighs of impatience, side-eyes, muttered comments. I also remember being fed, being allowed to have breakfast and a free lunch at school while my mother worked three jobs, raised 5 children, and earned her education. It was not a lack of work or laziness; we never saw her. This was something I wouldn't be able to understand until I was older.

Social programs saw our family through many Christmases, children, and years. What people don't understand, however, is just because we got the help, doesn't mean that things were instantly better. I meant we were able to maybe get by. As the oldest child, I became a de facto housekeeper, cook and babysitter. I traveled to practices and games with my friend's parents, and a was frequent houseguest at their various homes.

We lost our home when I was 12. Entering middle school not knowing where we were going to go was difficult, and by high school I was on my own due to the stressors in my home. Substance abuse, screaming, fighting, the unfortunate side-effects of living in survival mode for too long and having it rub you raw. Though my younger siblings do not remember, I do. These things affected me deeply, and I don't forget them to this day.

As a young person, I started working at a turkey farm and slaughterhouse in the town I grew up in when I was 15 and had dropped out of school due to the nature of things at home. I was able to rent my own apartment at 16 and earn my GED and my driver's license. I became pregnant with my daughter at 17.

Throughout this time, it was the programs available to me to help me better myself that paved the way. Being able to feed our family with SNAP, WIC helped to get formula, milk, and other nutritious food. ME Families would visit, bringing books and knowledge about good parenting. I was a frequent visitor to the Career Center, where I was able to sign up for Adult Education and earn my GED. I was able to utilize the technology and tools available to me where I couldn't afford them myself. I went through Work Ready training, which at the time taught me how to interview, how to present myself, and how to function in the workplace, how to write a resume. These skills were and are invaluable to me and helped to propel me forward. I walked everywhere I went because at the time I couldn't afford a car. Accessibility was key for me in finding my success, and I used it to my advantage.

During a mock interview with New Balance for my Work Ready training, I was offered the chance to interview for real and was hired for the job. I was 18 years old, and at the time, that was good money for entry level work. However, there were many avenues that lead me there, which I would not have found without the resources that were presented to me.

Coming of age during the tenure of LePage, I was keenly aware of the rhetoric floating around, the way he spoke about people in poverty, painting with a broad brush so many people who are just trying to get by. I tried to wash the paint off, but it felt like it was all over my face every time I went to use my EBT card, every time I walked in the DHHS office, every time I pulled out a WIC check. On average, it takes about 20 years for people to pull themselves out of poverty and I was only 18 years

old, born into it and working to fill the holes. Handhold to handhold, I parted ways with New Balance and began working as a cook at Colby College. I loved it, though my pay was a lot less, about \$8 an hour. I watched from behind the counter as all these young people came through my lunch line, and I wondered. What would it be like on the other side? I knew I couldn't afford Colby; I didn't even think that I would end up going to college, and yet, little did I know at the time that not only would I go, but I would also graduate, and the experience would change my entire life.

When I dropped out of high school, my guidance counselor told me that he would have a reference letter waiting for me when I went to college. At the time, I just laughed because in my teenage mind that was impossible. He was a man of his word, and when I contacted him years later, he told me he had it ready and waiting for me. I was accepted to the University of Maine at Farmington that summer and started in the Fall. His office had been my refuge while I was in school, an academically gifted child that was struggling socially and hurting at home. He was one person that didn't say I was a "bad kid." He saw the child within struggling with so much pain behind the toughness and attitude, and he guided her forward.

When I started college, we moved into the first place we had ever had where my daughter had her own bedroom, it was a gift to her for her second birthday, as everything I had went into taking us there. It was a fresh start.

Where my daughter's father was in prison for much of her life from birth to age 3, and again later, I had little support from him or in the way of family. I applied for TANF and joined the PAS program. This was before FEDCAP, and I had one worker who I met with, that supported me and knew my case and my situation, that connected me with the resources I needed to succeed, including childcare, help with car repairs and transportation, assistance with books and other necessary items for school. Not only that, but she knew me. Tabitha, wherever you are, I just want you to know that made a big difference in this girl's life, and I couldn't have done it without you. It is shame how much the way the Department manages TANF, outreach, PAS, etc. now because the experience the whole purpose of the programs people are trying to access due to inability to contact the Department or find resolution for the issues that have arisen.

Contracting with FEDCAP has convoluted the process, and distances people from their goals by making resources inconsistent and difficult to access. Telling people that have no money for basic needs that you can give them a clothing allowance doesn't help, meeting the actual need does. Making people take time from their jobs, etc. is counterintuitive at best.

I can attest to that, given that my most recent experience on TANF was after being hospitalized and losing my job. I had taken a temporary job with Family Dollar to try to make ends meet and was feeling so frustrated with losing a job that seemed really promising because I had a medical episode. Chronic illness brings stigma, especially in the workplace, and it felt so defeating to be in a place where I felt like I was losing all of the progress I made due to no real fault of my own.

I sought case management through the Whole Families program at WCAP, which, in hindsight, changed my life. I would like to really emphasize that my worker, the boots on the ground contact, was the one that helped me to implement that.

She connected me with different resources, gas to continue to get back and forth, food assistance, emotional triage through having someone to there to listen and be supportive where there was no one.

She helped me to create goals and suggested that I apply with the agency where I was qualified. I applied for a job that day and have been a case manager and Whole Families coach with the agency ever since. That has been quite the experience, but for today's purposes, I am very grateful to have been able to find a job that allowed me to transition off TANF and serve my community.

Transitional services are LACKING. Not being able to reach DHHS, or when you do, not being able to be connected with knowledgeable staff is HURTING people. These are people's lives, and when policy is actively hurting it is time to revisit those

policies in the spirit of positive change.

I have worked my whole life to pull us out of poverty only to watch the bridge actively burn in front of me while I tried to walk across and get to the other side. I lost my healthcare coverage only to fight with MECare for THREE MONTHS to get a certificate of coverage so I could enroll with my employer, which I never got. I lost MECare at the end of August, was not able to get coverage until January 1, which, the department is directly responsible for in their inability to give me the documentation I needed.

As someone with chronic illness, that was detrimental to me. I lost my services, med management, therapy because I was not able to afford those things out of pocket though they are a big part of what helps me to stay healthy enough to work and help others. Transitional services were difficult to access, and have been screwed up almost every single month, which means hours of waiting on the phone to try to fix things, often to no avail. Is DHHS going to pay back the wages I have lost over time just trying to coordinate my benefits? No, and there are other collateral consequences, for example, having friction at my job because I must take that time to try to manage those things, which interrupts my work.

Please stop putting people through that cycle. It is hard enough to pull yourself up and out as it is.

The heart and soul of the work the Department is doing has been cut out of the center, as there is no being known or relating to people, no support, no true connection to the people they are serving during brief hurried interactions with people so burned out from trying to plug holes that they have no more to give. These kinds of things discourage progress. KNOW THIS, and please LEARN FROM IT.

Extra funds are great, but they need to be able to be applied to truly meet present needs instead of a one size fits all approach, and truth be told, as much as I support the extra funding, \$5000 is just a drop in the bucket when you have so many families in need, in crisis, barely hanging on and unable to afford to live.

When people aren't even able to cover the basics, it is really difficult to try to advance or build equity in yourself or your family when you are barely hanging on and dealing with the stigma of needing help already.

Yes. Please fund this TANF money. Please invest in more staff, and one-on-one workers, please revamp this entirely broken system. As someone who has experienced it before and after, and lived through it, I can tell you that I would not have made it through college without what PAS provided me.

Get rid of FEDCAP, because contracting this most important work out to the highest bidder is not working.

What if it was your future?

Thank you.