

Testimony of Shawn Yardley in support of LD 1877, An Act to Reduce the Number of Children Living in Deep Poverty by Adjusting Assistance for Low-income Families

February 1, 2024

Good afternoon Senator Baldacci, Representative Meyer, and honorable members of the Joint Standing Committee on Health and Human Services. My name is Shawn Yardley, and I am the former CEO of Community Concepts. I am here today to provide testimony in strong support of LD 1877 because it would increase economic stability and opportunity for Maine families through the TANF program.

I served as the CEO of Community Concepts for eight years. 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 has also been 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. 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.

Through these forums, and throughout the course of my career, I have seen first-hand how hard families across the state are working to stabilize their lives. TANF has so much potential as a program that can better help families and reduce child poverty, but unfortunately, the current benefit levels are simply not enough to help families make ends meet, let alone get ahead. With changes, like those included in LD 1877, TANF/ASPIRE could be a powerful tool for Maine families.

People come to Community Concepts with a variety of needs that are often driven by systemic barriers and gaps in our social safety net, 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 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 to 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. An unexpected flat tire led to a downward spiral that quickly led him back to

homelessness. I believe the TANF program 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.

TANF can and should be part of the solution. With some extra support in the form of increased TANF grants and easier access to necessary supports, families would be better off in ways that we would see pay off in our communities and workforce

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