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LD: 1877: An Act to Reduce the Number of Children Living in Deep Poverty by Adjusting
Assistance for Low-Income Families

Committee on Health and Human Services
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Senator Baldacci, Representative Meyer, and members of the Committee on Health and Human Services.

My name is Luisa S. Deprez. I am Professor Emerita of Sociology and Social Policy at the University of Southern Maine. I am here to testify in support of LD 1877 which intends to provide low-income families with children sufficient income to live with stability.

I am grateful to Senator Meyer and her co-sponsors for bringing this legislation forward. It is critically needed.

My work on issues of poverty, social policy, and public assistance and safety net programs extends over the last 50 years. These decades of research on AFDC and TANF have led me to appreciate both the critical nature of the TANF program to Maine families *and* how desperately it needs to be improved to really meet the needs of Maine families.

My colleague UMaine Professor of Social Work Sandra Butler and I recently completed a study whose focus was on this very topic of financial security for parents with low-income. We conducted a survey of low-income student-parents enrolled in Maine's HOPE, Parents as Scholars, and ASPIRE programs, programs designed to support them as they pursue post-secondary education. A majority of them (the exception being those enrolled in HOPE) are recipients of TANF.

The participants in this study were eligible for additional financial assistance up to \$2000 a year to spend on what they needed to keep their families afloat. Meeting basic needs prevailed. They used the funds for transportation including car repairs, housing, electricity, heat, education supplies, clothing and shoes. and food. Basic living expenses. While the programs in which they were enrolled provided some support and resources, it was clearly not enough.

When asked what expenses are continually difficult to cover, they checked the same: transportation, utilities, housing, internet, education supplies, food, and heat. For some of these needs, there is nowhere for parents to turn. And clearly the allocations they are receiving now are not adequate.

Maine is a very expensive state to live in. Housing is expensive, electricity is expensive, heating is expensive, transportation is expensive, food is expensive. These are all basic needs and all the things that respondents in our study, and undoubtedly families beyond our study, are struggling with day in and day out.

According to Bureau of Economic Analysis data for 2021, the average annual cost of living in Maine was \$50,559. Data gathered in 2022 from the Missouri Economic Research and Information Center, ranked the state 40th in a list of states with the lowest to the highest [cost of living](#). The [U.S. News and World Report's](#) Affordability Ranking placed Maine as 35th in 2023.

Maine's poverty rate according to the [US Census Bureau](#) currently stands at 10.8%. The median household income in 2022 dollars is \$68,251. The per capita income again in 2022 dollars at \$39,718.

In our study, 52.4% of these student parents had annual incomes of under \$10,000 a year; 22.3% had annual incomes of between \$10,001 and \$20,000. They were nowhere near these medians or per capita incomes.

Our sample represented a diverse group: the majority were women: 89.3%; over 50% were first-gen; 87% heads-of-households; 25% identified as a race other than white; and 40% of families had a special needs child. These are groups that have historically encountered and experienced inequity.

While trying to achieve stability and security for themselves and mostly for their children, these families are struggling, many under the most difficult of conditions and as our data showed, they were rarely free of financial stress. Each month, in order to keep afloat, they moved their limited incomes into a different "to-be-paid-at-another-time" category while building a continuing trail of debt. And the harder we push families to the edge, the more fragile they become. While resourceful and resilient, they just can't come out even; thrift only goes so far. Financial worries are a constant. And they often have few people who "have their back".

The recently released State of the State report from the Maine Center for Economic Policy is clear that Maine's workforce is plateauing and that the number of traditional age workers is down. The parents participating in the HOPE, PaS and ASPIRE programs can help to turn that around. They are able to enter the workforce to fill some of the jobs that are most in need. Almost 40% aspired to go into social work and counseling. Over 25% were interested in the medical field. 10% were pursuing business degrees. But they, like many low-income families need additional support.

This bill provides the state with the opportunity to recognize the abundance of determination, perseverance and optimism these parents bring to the state, as do the hundreds of others trying to exist and raise their families on too little assistance. There is a cost to continuing along this path. One that is not destined to enhance the economic stability of these families or of the state.

Poverty is taking its toll on the state and on these families committed to contributing to its well-being.

A recent [editorial](#) in the Portland Press Herald brought attention to the crisis in chronic school absenteeism. It is, they wrote, an issue exacerbated by poverty. Last year in Maine, 27.3% of K-12 students missed more than 10% of the school year. The rate, however, is twice as high for poor students as it is for their better-off counterparts. Their families are attempting to function under the most difficult of conditions, barely making it. "When simply finding food, shelter and care is an hour-by-hour struggle, getting to school some days becomes a [low priority](#). Sometimes, with unstable transportation and housing, it's impossible" the PPH wrote. Maine can do better than this.

Like with the dire predictions of climate change – which are now more evident than ever - the state is at a breaking point. Immediate attention to the dreadful state of Maine families, especially those already in poverty and those in jeopardy of falling, requires the upmost attention of state policymakers and officials.

You have an opportunity to alleviate the angst that too many families in the state are experiencing. Your actions to increase financial assistance to low-income families will have wide-ranging impact - think back to what the Portland Press Herald brought to the forefront as it linked education and poverty: “Families are getting help from local schools. What they really need are the resources to get by.”

Providing a reasonable level of financial assistance to poor and low-income parents it is a critical first step in stabilizing low-income Maine families and building the economy of the state.

Thank you for this opportunity.