

Testimony of Lisa Black,
TRIO Director at Kennebec Valley Community College,
in support of LD 1877

February 1, 2024

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

My name is Lisa Black and I live in Bangor, Maine. I am the Director of Kennebec Valley Community College's TRIO educational opportunity program. I do not represent KVCC or the Maine Community College System. I am here today on my own time and of my own accord as a private citizen because I firmly believe that our state must do more to create pathways out of generational poverty, support low income parents to pursue their educational goals, and strengthen our workforce through education and training programs that provide adequate resources to support success.

I see the enormous barriers to earning a college credential that low-income student parents face every day. TANF's financial support, as well as education and training supports, have such potential to be the boost these individuals need to change their families' trajectories and to build Maine's workforce, but we must do more to modernize our TANF program when inflation and economic conditions have put rent, utilities, food and other basics farther and farther out of reach for families with the lowest incomes.

The majority of my students are returning adult learners with low income who, if successful, would be the first in their families to earn a college degree. This population is already at risk, but students in this demographic who are also parents are particularly vulnerable. When life inevitably happens and children get sick, unexpected bills crop up, or worse, the competing demands of work, home, elder, and childcare become exponentially harder to juggle. The very college classes that promise a way out of precarious financial situations can be the first to fall by the wayside. This leads to academic and financial consequences at students' academic institutions that jeopardize their ability to return, trapping them in a system that was supposed to offer a way out. Benefit programs like TANF and ASPIRE provide crucial financial support to struggling families and are intended to provide the safety net necessary to mitigate crises like these, but they must meet the cost of living to truly make the intended impact.

This is why I support LD 1877 as a way to make improvements to TANF for Mainers. LD 1877 provides more income for families and more access to education and training. LD 1877 supports parents finding and keeping a good job by increasing the monthly benefit and reducing financial and bureaucratic stressors that hold families back from achieving their employment and educational goals when they have young children.

LD 1877 would also create a more streamlined process for DHHS to verify eligibility for support services. This means simplifying and streamlining the application process, the process of accessing support services and ensuring that people are treated fairly and with respect. Modernizing Maine's TANF program, bringing it in line with other states' approaches and current economic conditions, will ensure families have opportunities to meet their needs and their goals.

These components would greatly enhance participants' success and increase overall participation in the program.

Finally, I want to assure you that the parents who would benefit from these reforms are so worth the investment. They are exactly the hardworking people we need in Maine's workforce. TANF higher ed programs like Parents as Scholars hold such promise as a game-changer for so many Maine parents who do not currently hold a credential of value. I appreciate this opportunity to share my observations about the needs and potential of this population and ask that you please support LD 1877. I am happy to answer any questions you might have.