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Health and Human Services Committee

**Re: SUPPORT for General Assistance Bills LD453, LD1017, LD1029
OPPOSITION to General Assistance Bills LD1046, LD1066**

Senator Ingwersen, Representative Meyer, and honorable members of the Health and Human Services Committee,

My name is Emily Flinkstrom and I am the Executive Director of Fair Tide, a non-profit providing deeply affordable housing and supportive services to people experiencing homelessness in the southern part of our state. I serve as a representative from Region One (York and Cumberland Counties) to the Statewide Homeless Council and am an active member of Maine's Homeless Policy Committee. Fair Tide is also the co-founder of Mainspring, a new resource hub of social services that offers coordinated, wrap-around support to help households navigate a pathway out of poverty. Of particular relevance to these bills, Fair Tide's Case Manager administers the General Assistance (G.A.) program for the towns of Kittery and Eliot under the Mainspring umbrella.

Our work places us in a unique position to offer grounded testimony on the potential implications of these bills, but we are not alone in our views regarding changes that would be beneficial to the G.A. program. In 2023, the Department of Health and Human Services conducted a number of listening sessions with relevant stakeholders to gather input on General Assistance. Among the many findings, there was nearly universal agreement that this resource is critical to meeting the basic needs of community members and the state should, "re-evaluate maximums to account for rising costs" and, "increase reimbursements".

The General Assistance program can serve as the gateway to financial independence by helping individuals and families meet their basic needs and allowing upward movement in Maslow's hierarchy to focus on employment and education. Absent the availability of other housing resources, G.A. is an essential source of stability for the growing number of Mainers who struggle with housing insecurity and homelessness. We offer the following thoughts related to the proposed bills so G.A. can continue to save lives and serve as a catalyst for financial stability.

G.A. maximums must be increased to ensure they cover the full cost of food, housing and other basic necessities. **Raising the reimbursement rate for municipalities** will keep individuals and families in their home communities while they find their footing. For those who fall into homelessness, **G.A. can provide financial support to our emergency shelters** so they can keep our community members safe and transition them back home as quickly as possible. However, given the tight housing market securing a housing placement can be a lengthy process.



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Extending the timeline for presumptive eligibility for individuals in shelters will provide more sufficient financial support for shelters to play their critical and life-saving role in the housing continuum. **Any arbitrary time or residency restrictions on the G.A. benefits will only set households back on their journey to financial stability.**

We have the opportunity to greatly improve the General Assistance program through the measures highlighted above, and a number of other changes that were laid out in DHHS's G.A. Listening Sessions report. I, and Fair Tide's case management team, would be more than happy to engage in discussions as this committee studies these bills and takes up this important task.

Thank you for taking the time to consider Fair Tide's testimony.

With appreciation,

Emily Flinkstrom, MSW
Executive Director

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