



April 7, 2025

To: Members of the Health and Human Services Committee.

I am Martha Stein, Executive Director of Hope Acts, a nonprofit organization in Portland Maine whose mission is: to asylum seekers access to housing and basic needs, assistance in navigating complex immigration processes, and resources for learning English to help them successfully transition to a new life in Maine. I am writing in support of LDs that keep or strengthen support of General Assistance for people to receive and maintain housing and food. I am also writing to oppose LDs that limit access to General Assistance.

Specifically, I am in support of LD 1017 - An Act to Include Food Provided or Served at Emergency Shelters in General Assistance Reimbursement, LD 1029 - An Act to Ensure General Assistance for Housing Does Not Reduce Assistance for Other Basic Necessities and to Increase Presumptive Eligibility and State Reimbursement for General Assistance

I strongly oppose LD 1046 - An Act to Establish a 180-day State Residency Requirement for Receiving Municipal General Assistance and LD 1066 - An Act Regarding Limits on Municipal General Assistance Programs.

It should be a given that a person staying in a municipal shelter does not have the means to obtain food on their own. Everyone needs to eat and no one can move forward with their life if they are hungry. Please ensure that people staying in shelters have adequate food and that the municipalities providing the food are adequately reimbursed by supporting LD 1017.

The people I work with, new asylum seekers to Maine, do not want to be on General Assistance, but the Federal Laws prohibiting them from working until they can apply for and they receive a work permit make it impossible for them to support themselves when they first arrive here. The affordable housing crisis makes things even worse. When New Mainers do receive a work permit and they begin working, most obtain low-paying jobs. They struggle to pay rent, put food on the table and to cover their basic necessities. Please do not pull the rug out from under people who are just starting to move forward.

I am strongly opposed to an 180-day residency requirement for receiving GA. People who are in crisis are unlikely going to have the means to provide necessary documentation showing them they have been here for 180 days. There are enough hurdles for people in crisis. It is very difficult for people who do not speak English to understand this type of requirement as well.

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Perhaps even worse than LD 1046 is LD 1066, an act that would dramatically increase homelessness and pressure on existing homeless shelters in the state (not to mention hospitals, schools etc.). No one can predict a crisis that could impact their ability to pay for their housing and food. The idea that a family experiencing a crisis could recover from that crisis in 30 or 90 days is not realistic for people who are barely scraping by.

For asylum seekers, most who are on General Assistance until they receive a work permit, they would be consigned to homelessness, illegally working and/or subjecting themselves to exploitation. Aside from creating unthinkable homelessness, this proposal does not recognize the state's economic plan includes large numbers of immigrants joining and contributing to Maine's economy.

I offer to recent examples of Hope Acts' clients, asylum seekers who started out on GA. These are two of thousands of families we have worked with over the last several years.

Family #1 mom, dad and child. Since becoming stably housed and supported, the dad enrolled in drivers' education. He passed the Commercial Drivers' License exam and he is working as a bus driver. Mom is working at a local hospital and she is studying to become a Certified Nursing Assistant.

Family of #2 - single mom with two children. This family is stably housed with support from our housing program. Once childcare and other essentials were in place, the mom enrolled in a teller training program and she now is employed by a local bank.

Today's immigrants are no different than many of our ancestors. Unthinkable circumstances caused them to flee their home countries. All they want is to be able to have a safe place to live and to be able to provide for their families. What is different than when my grandparents came to the United States is Federal law which prohibits asylum seekers from working until they have gone through a long, difficult legal process. Today's asylum seekers have no choice but to temporarily rely on General Assistance.

I urge Maine legislators to support General Assistance and safety net programs for the poor.

Thank you,

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