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Testimony on behalf of Maine Equal Justice in support of LD 1566, *An Act to Provide Compensation to Individuals with Lived Experience Serving on Advisory Boards, Commissions, Councils and Similar Groups*

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Good afternoon Senator Baldacci, Representative Salisbury, and Members of the Committee on State and Local Government. My name is Ann Danforth and I use she/her pronouns. I'm a Senior Policy Advocate at Maine Equal Justice (MEJ), a nonprofit civil legal aid provider working to increase economic security, opportunity, and equity for people in Maine.

I'm here today to testify in support of LD 1566, An Act to Provide Compensation to Individuals with Lived Experience Serving on Advisory Boards, Commissions, Councils and Similar Groups.

Maine Equal Justice has been active at the State House for over 25 years. Our work focuses on many of the issues that affect your constituents' daily lives – access to adequate health care, housing, transportation and childcare; food and income security; and higher education and training.

Importantly, MEJ works in partnership with people living in poverty to organize and advocate together for equitable laws and policies, as we believe people who are directly impacted by poverty are best suited to identify and advocate for related policy solutions.

We are heartened that more and more legislatively created committees are now including members with lived experience with expertise in the subject area. At the same time, we realize that many of these same people are those least likely to have the time and finances to enable them to participate in legislatively created groups which often meet for long periods during the workday.

LD 1566 would authorize reimbursement and compensation for members with lived experience participating in advisory boards, making it more likely that they will be able to participate given their financial and time constraints. It also sends an important signal that we value and need their input and that they bring significant expertise.

I have seen first-hand the positive impact of creating time and resources for the engagement of people with lived experience and how it makes state policies better. MEJ works closely with our TANF/ASPIRE Leadership Team – a group of single moms who have participated in the Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) program and work with MEJ to inform and advocate for our policy priorities. Thanks to their insights and engagement, we have made significant improvements in Maine’s TANF program over the past few years.

We know well that the most important voices in how state programs function are those of participants. We also know how important it is to compensate people with lived experience for the time and the expertise they bring. Too often, the people bringing the most lived experience to an advisory council, taskforce, or commission are the only people at the table not being compensated for their time there - since everyone else is participating as part of their job. Their experience is essential to fully understand the way programs work for the people who they are meant to serve so we should be compensating them for that expertise.

As the Committee considers this bill, I encourage you to include language that would, to the extent possible, exempt compensation from counting against people’s public benefits. If not specifically excluded, certain benefit programs like TANF will “count” advisory board compensation as “income” for the purposes of determining eligibility and benefit amounts. This would end up having the opposite effect of this bill’s intent. LD 1566 could direct state agencies to engage in rulemaking to *“exclude compensation to individuals with lived experience serving on state advisory boards, commissions, councils and similar groups and other payments that participants receive as compensation for civic engagement and otherwise volunteering their time to improve state programs from counting as income for the purposes of public benefit programs, to the extent allowable under federal and state law.”*

Thank you for your time and I’m happy to answer any questions you may have.

Ann Danforth