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United Way
of Southern Maine



Good morning, Senator Ingwersen, Representative Meyer, and Members of the Health and Human Services Committee,

My name is Julie Orrego, and I am the Advocacy Supervisor at Preble Street. Preble Street's mission is to provide accessible, barrier-free services to empower people experiencing problems with homelessness, housing, hunger, and poverty and advocate for solutions to these problems. Preble Street operates 16 programs throughout Maine, and its staff works daily alongside hundreds of individuals and families who struggle with housing insecurity.

Preble Street supports LD 978, An Act to Increase General Assistance Reimbursement for Municipalities and Indian Tribes. We want to give special thanks to Portland Representative Zager and Senator Talbot Ross for sponsoring this legislation, which proposes a needed increase in the state's reimbursement rate for General Assistance (GA) expenditures, raising it from 70% to 90% over a phased timeline. This bill will immediately alleviate the financial burden on non-service center municipalities and tribes, enabling them to provide emergency assistance to their residents. This reimbursement change alone will go a long way in creating a more equitable and universal General Assistance policy across Maine.

If the committee decides to pursue a phased approach to addressing GA reimbursement through LD 978, we would like to advocate incorporating two additional elements into this bill from LD 1029. These two elements—increasing to 180 days presumptive eligibility and ensuring adequate eligibility for basic necessities—are critical to improving our state's General Assistance program.

As described in our testimony supporting LD 1029, Preble Street believes maximum assistance levels must account for housing assistance while ensuring adequate eligibility for other necessities. With ongoing rent increases in our state, an individual or household can easily reach the maximum assistance level with housing payments alone. This is the case for one of our clients, who uses her entire GA benefit amount to cover the rent for a modest one-bedroom apartment. When this client's caseworker stopped by the apartment, she noticed that the client had very few possessions besides a box of donated food. As it stands, this client cannot obtain household essentials, such as soap, toilet paper, and trash bags, because she has no remaining GA availability, and these items are not commonly available at food pantries. LD 1029's guidelines acknowledge that rent is not the only expense individuals and families face; General Assistance should also be available to help with other costs, such as those for toiletries, diapers, and prescriptions. We believe this should be incorporated into LD 978.

50 years of turning hunger and homelessness into opportunity and hope

At a time when housing options are limited and emergency shelter stays are becoming longer, any General Assistance bill supported by this committee should prioritize increasing presumptive eligibility from 30 to 180 days. When a person arrives at an emergency homeless shelter, they are presumed to be eligible for General Assistance for 30 days, after which their eligibility must be re-determined. Expanding presumptive eligibility to 180 days removes an administrative burden from emergency shelter operators, who must assist their clients with completing additional GA paperwork every 30 days under the current rule.

Maine municipalities and Indian tribes are on the front lines of providing essential services to individuals and families facing economic hardship. By immediately increasing the state's reimbursement rate for non-service center communities and over a phased timeline for service centers, LD 978 ensures that local governments can continue to meet the growing demand for General Assistance without compromising other critical services.

By increasing the state's reimbursement rate for General Assistance, this bill empowers municipalities and Indian tribes to better serve their communities and uphold the values of equity and support that define our state. Preble Street urges the committee to pass this bill with an amendment that increases presumptive eligibility and ensures that rising housing costs do not reduce a household's ability to access basic necessities.

Thank you for your consideration.

