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MEJ Testimony opposing LD 1996, An Act to Clarify Responsibilities of the State in the Laws Governing General Assistance

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Good morning, Senator Ingwersen, Representative Meyer and members of the Health and Human Services Committee. My name is Dina Malual and I am a Policy Advocate with Maine Equal Justice (MEJ), a nonprofit legal aid provider working to increase economic security, opportunity, and equity for people in Maine.

Maine Equal Justice has worked on General Assistance since we were founded in the mid-90s, and some of our staff have worked on it for more than 40 years. In our legal services work, our engagement with low-income Mainers around public policies, and our advocacy work at the State House, with DHHS, and with municipalities, we have seen how General Assistance (GA) is an essential part of our safety net for Mainers in every region of our state, and we also have a great deal of experience with aspects of the program that need to be improved.

For these reasons, we stand in front of this committee and ask that you reject LD 1996. In the 131st Session, with leadership from this committee, the legislature passed LD 1732, which took several steps to improve the GA program, including the creation of a database by DHHS that would better provide data to inform policy decisions. Beginning July 1, 2025, the Department would use information from a real-time, internet-based database to improve GA eligibility and determination.

Despite enactment, the database was never created. In testimony last year on *LD 637, Resolve, Directing the Department of Health and Human Services to Evaluate the Municipal General Assistance*, which was duplicative statutory requirements passed in LD 1732 the previous session, the Department opposed LD 637 and cited high costs for the database delay. A Request for Proposals (RFP) had been launched to build a technology platform for the GA program and bids for the first year ranged between \$670,000 to \$3,700,000, increasing the following years, which the Department felt were too costly given other budgetary concerns.

As you know, this committee ultimately decided to amend another bill last year to repeal the database requirement, however that bill died. LD 1996 would repeal the database requirement and remove the requirement for the Department to report on the length of time individuals receive assistance. While this bill aligns with actions this committee took last year, we still ask that you reconsider.

General Assistance is needed now more than ever. At a time where state and federal program eligibility is narrowing and living costs are increasing, the demand for food and shelter is dire. Database and reporting requirements were introduced in 2023 and this year we will finally have more accurate and comprehensive data to support policy decisions, but it will be an incomplete picture of what is happening.

While we understand the cost challenge of creating a new database, we believe a database is vital to ensure effective administration. We also believe maintaining information about the length of time individuals or households receive assistance is important because of recent proposals to limit the period of time people can access assistance. How can we understand the implications of such a change if we don't have data about it?

For these reasons, we ask that the Joint Standing Committee of Health and Human Services delay the database rather than repeal it. Reporting without consistent data will be incomplete. A database can help ensure that we have a full picture about the individuals and families who received GA, the length of time assistance was received, and the types of assistance received.

While cost concerns are real, there are choices legislators can make to ensure we have adequate funding both for the assistance GA provides and for transparent administration of the program, which should include a database.

Thank you for the opportunity to comment. We urge you to reject LD 1996. I am happy to answer any questions and can be available for any work sessions.