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Testimony on Behalf of Maine Equal Justice *in support of* LD 1282, An Act to Streamline Income Verification Requests for Income Supplementation and Assistance Programs

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Good morning Senator Baldacci, Representative Meyer, and members of the Health and Human Services Committee. My name is Ann Danforth and I use she/her pronouns. I'm a Policy Advocate at Maine Equal Justice, a nonprofit legal aid provider working to increase economic security, opportunity, and equity for people in Maine.

Thank you for the opportunity to testify today in support of LD 1282.

Streamlining economic security programs reduces administrative burdens and helps people access them

At Maine Equal Justice, one of the one things we frequently hear from people accessing economic security programs is the challenges they face navigating a siloed system. The administrative responsibility to deliver the help people need is scattered throughout different governmental agencies and is largely not integrated or coordinated. People need to share the same information – income and other documentation that needs to be verified – over and over again with different state agencies, telling their story again and again. LD 1282 proposes one opportunity to better coordinate these processes between the Department of Health and Human Services and MaineHousing in a manner that would allow for more streamlined verification of eligibility factors between them both, lessening administrative burden for both governmental entities and people in need of services.

We can bring our safety net and work support programs into the 21st century and make these systems better equipped to respond to people's needs in a holistic manner. States throughout the nation have been modernizing their systems to reach this goal. For example, North Carolina's goal is to design their state-administered safety net systems so people "only have to tell their story once." We have begun to have similar conversations with agencies throughout state government here in Maine. With this change, the payoff will be great – it will improve governmental efficiencies, improve people's well-being, and improve the state's economy.

Federal law and data sharing challenges can be overcome

We are very sensitive to concerns around client confidentiality and data privacy. We also understand that there are federal laws in place to protect client data. Any electronic solution could and should, of course, respect these and must be contingent on consent by the client to share their information. This could be done in a number of ways – something as simple as a check-box indicating a client’s consent for MaineHousing to share data with DHHS or vice versa.

We would be glad to work with DHHS and MaineHousing to think through solutions, which we believe could be replicated in other programs as well, such as LIHEAP (the Home Energy Assistance Program, which is administered through MaineHousing by the Community Action Agencies). We recommend that any enhanced coordination between these two agencies that may result from this bill also apply to verification procedures for the LIHEAP as well, since the overwhelming majority of households receiving this heating assistance receive services from DHHS as well. These changes would ultimately reduce administrative burden, make programs more coordinated and human-centered, and more likely to reach the people who need them most.

Conclusion

Thank you for the opportunity to testify in support of LD 1282. I am happy to answer any questions you might have.