

April 27, 2023
100 State House Station
Augusta, ME 04333

Testimony in support of LD 1666 “An Act to Modernize the State Supplement to Supplemental Security Income by Updating the State Supplement and Removing Marriage Disincentives”

Dear Senator Baldacci, Representative Meyer, and members of the Health and Human Services Committee:

My name is Kile Pelletier and I live in Fort Kent, Maine. I am a self-advocate, and I am a Program Associate with Speaking Up For Us. I am testifying in support of LD 1666 because it is important for a person with a disability to be able to get married to another person with a disability and not lose their benefits.

If this bill is passed it will help us a lot by keeping our benefits and increasing the amount of the state income that we get from Social Security. The amount of \$8 is not enough for people with disabilities or other people that are on Social Security. A single person cannot live on \$8 and if you grant up to \$65 it will give a single person a better opportunity to pay their bills and to actually benefit from their Social Security.

Making the change to \$130 per month for a couple will offer some breathing room to live on Social Security. Social Security benefits are our lifeline. We need to keep up with the times as the costs of living go up, food prices go up, gas prices go up, and people with disabilities have a hard time living with the same amount of money. The Social Security rates for the state are not right and it's time to raise it to give us some breathing room.

This bill is important to me because I'm a person with a disability and my wife also has a disability and we depend on Social Security benefits. When my wife and I got married she lost her benefits, and it made her feel useless and poor. It caused me a lot of frustration because I had all of the income responsibility on my shoulders. I know there are things my wife could do like get a job, but she has barriers because of her disability. She doesn't have a car, a license, or the right supports available to her to get working. She isn't currently able to bring in income so we can live like a married couple like everyone else.

The burden of income falls completely on me. I have to pay the bills, go to the grocery store. I have to buy her hygiene products and clothes. She doesn't have income to call her own so she can make money decisions for herself. She always has to ask me. She has to rely on me. The system makes it so that there is a power struggle in our marriage. I believe my wife could be more independent from me, but she can't because she doesn't have any money.

It is a big stressor because I am also working on saving for our future and trying to make sure we can afford a place to live together. I feel at times we fall back instead of moving forward. I see married people without a disability able to go on vacation, go out to eat and the movies, or save and buy a house, and start a family. I have the burden of making sure we have enough food, electricity is paid and gas is in the car. At times, I feel like there is so much and we can't do it. It makes me feel like I should be doing more, but if I do more I will lose more of my benefits. I could lose the only lifeline I have to keep stability. There are times I can't sleep because I am thinking of this issue. I think of all the goals we could reach if only she had been able to keep her benefits and have her own income. I feel like we would be able to finally get ahead.

When we first got married, we thought she would keep some income. When we found out she would only get \$8, and then eventually none, we were shocked. My Mother In Law helped us to advocate. We even contacted a lawyer and he told us we should just get a divorce and live together. It was a slap in the face. Why do people with disabilities have to hide and keep their love secret from the social security administration so they can keep their benefits? If we want to get married we should be able to, just like anyone else. If we have religious beliefs or personal values, we shouldn't have to break them just so one of us doesn't lose their entire income. It just doesn't make any sense why simply getting married automatically changes something. When we get a certain amount of money, we always have to show proof of what it is. When we go over, it is sad and it is taken away. We are told it is a privilege. This doesn't feel like a privilege. Social Security income is our lifeline.

I have been a self-advocate for a long time and the marriage penalty issue is something I am passionate about eliminating. I understand that most of this work needs to be done on a federal level and I have been busy working on that front as well. If Maine chooses to pass this bill, we can be an example to other states to join the forces and eliminate the marriage penalty. It will be an example to Congress to make the change. This will help every person living in the United States to be able to get married if they choose and keep their benefits. They won't have to be afraid to have a family, work as much as they are able to, and make the same amounts of money as everyone else.

There have been several bills on a federal level dealing with Social Security reform that I have urged Congressional Delegates from Maine to co-sponsor. I have taken the opportunity to talk to them when they come to Fort Kent for the sled dog races. I even printed out papers and track down Rep. Jared Golden at the First Mile Brewery. Most recently, I met with an aide from Senator Susan Collins office and the Senator agreed to sign on to the SSI Savings Penalty Elimination Act which will raise asset limits for people. I have participated in a national webinar through The Administration for Community Living (ACL) to talk more about the issues people with disability face when they want to get married. I will not stop advocating for this to change because I know what this can do for my life, and for the life of other self-advocates.

Many people with disabilities live in poverty and want out. The system to help support us also holds us back because every time we start to get ahead another thing in our life goes up. Many self-advocates live in shared living or group homes. Whenever there is an income increase, their rent goes up. For once it would be great for us to get the supports we need, keep the benefits necessary, and be able to make plans for our futures.

Thank you for your time and effort. Please keep in mind this bill affects people who live with disabilities and if we don't change the rules of Social Security and eliminate the marriage penalty, people with disabilities will continue to struggle and feel that they can't get married, can't go to work, and can't save for their future because they would lose their benefits.

Thank You for your time, the opportunity to testify, and your consideration of LD 1666. I am happy to answer any of your questions.

Sincerely,
Kile Pelletier
Fort Kent, ME
kpelletier@sufumaine.org