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**Testimony of Deborah Ibonwa, Maine Equal Justice in support of
LD 1664, *An Act to Increase Reimbursement Under the General Assistance Program*, and LD
1732, *An Act to Expand the General Assistance Program***

May 5, 2023

Good morning Senator Baldacci, Representative Meyer, and members of the Committee on Health and Human Services. My name is Deborah Ibonwa, I use she/her pronouns, and I am a Legal Advocate at Maine Equal Justice. We are a civil legal services organization working with and for people with low income seeking solutions to poverty through legal representation, organizing, education, and policy advocacy. I am testifying in support of **LD 1664 and LD 1732**.

LD 1664 and LD 1732 are common-sense proposals to streamline the delivery of assistance to people who are in need of shelter and rental assistance at this unprecedented time.

LD 1664 and LD 1732 both increase the amount of state reimbursement from 70% to 90% for the cost of General Assistance (GA) incurred by each municipality and Indian tribe - a needed change to ensure municipalities can continue to assist their residents experiencing financial hardships in the face of a growing housing crisis leading to more people seeking help. In addition, LD 1732 provides state reimbursement for additional program costs, including emergency general assistance, temporary housing, interpreter services, and administrative expenses. GA exists to help the most needy people in Maine. It benefits us all when our neighbors are safe from the harms of living on the street. This proposal will enable more people to be able to get the amount of assistance they need by increasing the overall reimbursement rate. These proposals would have an immense impact on the lives of our most vulnerable neighbors. A high rate of reimbursement which is guaranteed to municipalities for something such as rental assistance would make GA a more reliable source of rent in the eyes of landlords, reducing the risk of discrimination based on "source of income" and increasing the number of people who would be able to maintain housing and shelter.

LD 1732 would streamline the GA process in several different ways

1. Requiring municipalities to accept applications for GA during regular business hours, which means all GA offices would be required to have consistent hours of operation. Right now, some GA offices are open only one day a week or for just one or a few hours.

- each week This portion of the bill would create program uniformity and make it easier for those in need to access assistance no matter where they live
- 2 Requiring training for overseers or appointed municipal officers within 120 days of appointment Right now, the statute does not require training This provision will result in greater consistency in the administration of GA across the state
 - 3 It requires the Department of Health and Human Services to provide the services necessary to support municipalities, including education and training for certain state employees, 24-hour technical assistance, written decisions and a database

LD 1664 would also help ensure that the municipalities that bear the lion's share of responsibility for providing GA to vulnerable people in the state can continue to do so in a way that is efficient, sustainable, and in accordance with the law.

The bill proposes to adjust the state's rate of reimbursement for towns and cities that provide a greater amount of GA to people There are several reasons why certain municipalities in the state provide assistance to significantly more people than others

- **Population.** Larger towns and cities like Portland, Bangor, and Lewiston have more people and so naturally would have larger numbers of people seeking assistance from the local GA offices
- **Economy:** For as long as there have been cities, people struggling to make ends meet have migrated to them in search of opportunity Despite their bigger economies, they aren't perfectly efficient machines that can absorb all who seek a better life, so some end up seeking assistance This happens for a wide variety of reasons, but one is that larger populations come with greater labor competition and people struggling with poverty in the first place often lack marketable skills or other challenges that impact their ability to work, such as physical or mental health issues, lack of transportation, or housing insecurity Another is that the low-wage work that is more attainable may not pay enough to help people make ends meet
- **Services.** Bigger populations and bigger economies also mean more infrastructure and institutions, such as hospitals, schools, government services, and non-governmental service providers For this reason, larger towns are sometimes referred to as "service centers," and it is natural for people who are struggling with poverty and dealing with a variety of dire situations to go to where they might be able to get help

The positive impacts of LD 1664 and LD 1732 will be seen in areas of Maine that are most strained in capacity and resources to administer GA These municipalities are at risk of having to significantly raise local taxes without a rise in reimbursement rates It is not only fair but the obligation of the State to support its municipalities in cases like this These are the most populated areas in Maine, with the most resources and infrastructure that can provide support to our most vulnerable residents Community organizations that work on the ground are currently sharing the burden of this crisis with local GA offices This should not be the case, as neither GA

offices nor these organizations have the capacity that the State does to offer support. These bills will help ensure our service hubs can continue to rise to the challenges of this moment.

LD 1664 and LD 1732 are Good Starting Points for a Multi-Pronged Approach to Fix GA.

For these many reasons, it is important to pass LD 1664 and LD 1732. Yet it is also true that there are other changes needed for GA to be most successful. While it is a vital program, GA does not work as efficiently as it could, and this is not due to just one shortcoming. In addition to addressing the reimbursement rate, there are other measures that can strengthen this program, including increased oversight, training, longer eligibility periods, and consistent administration. These types of structural changes have been studied and recommended by multiple GA working groups in 2013, 2015, and 2019. Each of these groups consisted of a variety of stakeholders, such as municipal welfare directors, Maine Municipal Association, advocates for Mainers with low-income, veterans, consumers, local housing authorities, Maine State Housing Authority, and DHHS. The recommendations of these working groups can serve as a guide to making the GA program work better for both those in need and for municipalities.

Conclusion

We all know that Maine is in the midst of a housing crisis and today GA provides critical assistance to keep people housed or to help support people in finding new housing. The proposals in LDs 1664 and 1732 will strengthen GA through common sense solutions. GA is the program that is most immediately available to the most vulnerable Mainers. Given the increasing number of Mainers struggling with housing insecurity and financial instability, the municipalities that provide the largest share of GA are being stretched beyond their ability to meet the needs of their residents. LD 1664 and LD 1732 propose changes that would make an immediate positive impact. In particular, an increase in the reimbursement rate would act as a fire extinguisher for the fire that our largest cities and many towns are experiencing. For these reasons we urge you to pass these bills. And we also ask that you look at the other changes needed to make GA work even better for the municipalities administering it, and, most importantly, for the people who need the assistance it provides.

Thank you for the opportunity to express our support for these important bills and **urge you to vote Ought to Pass on LD 1664 and LD 1732**. I am happy to answer any questions you might have and I can be available for the work session.