

PENQUIS

**131st Legislature
Committee on Health and Human Service**

Testimony of Renae Muscatell, Community Relations Manager of Penquis

in favor of An Act to Reduce the Number of Children Living in Deep Poverty by Adjusting Assistance for Low-income Families LD 1877

February 1, 2024

Senator Joseph Baldacci, Representative Michele Meyer, and members of the Joint Standing Committee on Health and Human Services, my name is Renae Muscatell. I am from Bangor, ME, and I am the Community Relations Manager at Penquis, a large community action agency in central/northern Maine that serves between 3,500 and 5,000 people each day. I am a certified facilitator for the “aha Process”, a poverty reduction program that supports individuals from generational poverty to build resources and provide training for community members and professionals on economic diversity. I am here today to provide testimony in strong support of LD 1877.

Over the last 14 years at Penquis, I have witnessed countless families struggle to meet the most basic needs. One program we offer to help families is our back-to-school program, which offers a backpack and school supplies to school-aged children. This program serves 1,200 low-income families each year. While these families express gratitude for this help, many report a need for clothing support as well. Parents share that their children have outgrown their clothing and shoes and are without resources to meet these needs. A common statement we hear is, “This backpack is the only new thing my child will have when they return to school this year.”

Growing up in poverty in a single-parent home with four siblings, I recall not having adequate clothing. I outgrew my clothing and didn’t have what was needed when the seasons changed. Fighting my siblings for a pair of socks was a real thing in my home. For me, clothing insecurity led to missed days of school, lowered self-esteem, and an inability to participate in physical education or any sporting activities that required special clothing or equipment. While this was many years ago, clothing insecurity still impacts school-aged children today. At Penquis, we recently helped a mom secure winter clothing for her child through our Coats of Kindness Program because her son was being held inside at recess for not having the “proper” winter attire.

LD 1877 will support clothing security for children and families, with its inclusion of clothing allowance for TANF household members. It would increase opportunities for children to be prepared for school success and opportunities to be included in all school activities. It would also increase parents' work readiness by providing clothing suitable for the workforce.

I also oversee a holiday-giving program where children share their holiday wishes. This program served 1,600 children last year. What is notable about this is the number of wishes for basic needs, such as hygiene items, winter coats, boots, and bedding. Basic needs are so lacking for Maine families that is what filled their holiday wish lists.

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In March 2020, Penquis initiated a rapid response team to address daily requests for assistance, and having received thousands of calls for help, the basic needs of low-income families in Maine remain a top priority. Food, housing, car repair, and employment resources rise to the top of these requests.

Children go to school inadequately clothed. People have vehicles that can't pass inspection or car repairs they can't afford. Families report going from food bank to food bank and simply running out of resources to address their needs. The bandwidth for low-income families is dominated by survival with very little left for planning ahead or advancing one's life.

Later in my childhood, there was a time when we achieved greater economic stability. The energy in our home shifted from survival to the betterment of our lives. My mother then had the capacity to help with my college applications, to read to my youngest sister, my teen brothers were able to play on the high school football team, and we all began to thrive. Having our basic needs met changed everything. LD 1877 would provide similar opportunities for families to achieve stability and flourish.

A meaningful TANF benefit would provide low-income families with the ability to move beyond survival to building healthy, stable lives for themselves and their children. The current TANF benefit is the lowest in New England and I know we can do better, giving families and children every opportunity to succeed.

I know that we all agree that every person in Maine deserves to have their most basic needs met, with opportunities to better their lives. Maine families and children need help, and they need help now. LD 1877 is an investment in the growth and stability of Maine's children, families, and future.

Thank you for your time today and your consideration.