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Testimony of Rep. Michele Meyer presenting

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

Before the Joint Standing Committee on Health and Human Services

Good afternoon, colleagues of the Joint Standing Committee for Health and Human Services. I am Rep. Michele Meyer, serving Southern Maine's District 150, Eliot and parts of Kittery and South Berwick. I am very pleased to introduce **LD 1877, Act to Reduce the Number of Children Living in Deep Poverty by Adjusting Assistance for Low-income Families**.

Maine has a child poverty problem. Today, almost one in eight¹ Maine children are growing up in poverty. This number is even more stark in Maine's more rural counties like Piscataquis, Somerset and Washington counties, where the child poverty rate is above 18% (close to 1 in 5). More than one out of every eight² kids are food insecure, living in families that worry whether they will have enough to eat. Some Mainers are more likely to be impacted by poverty, including rural Mainers and female-headed single-parent households.

As this committee knows well, child poverty has serious, long-term consequences for children and communities. Children who grow up in poverty are less likely to succeed in school, less likely to graduate high school, and more likely to be out of the workforce as adults. The experience of childhood poverty has profound long-term effects on health, earnings and even mortality.

Child poverty isn't an individual problem. Children live in families who live in communities, who make up our vibrant state and our state's economy. We all have a stake in addressing child poverty. Poverty challenges our schools, our health care system, our communities, our workforce and our economy.

¹ <https://datacenter.aecf.org/data/tables/43-children-in-poverty?loc=21&loct=2#detailed/2/21/false/1095,2048,1729,37,871,870,573,869,36,868/any/321,322>

² <https://datacenter.aecf.org/data/tables/5201-children-living-in-households-that-were-food-insecure-at-some-point-during-the-year?loc=21&loct=2#detailed/2/21/false/2097,1985,1757,1687,1652,1564,1491,1443,1218,1049/any/11674,1167>

We can and must do better. Maine can be a state in which families have the opportunity to meet their basic needs to thrive and find gainful, sustainable employment – lifting their families out of poverty and setting us all on a better path.

While there has been a lot in the news lately about the huge poverty reduction impact of important policies like the federal Child Tax Credit, there has been less of a focus on TANF and the potential there is for this program to help move the needle on child poverty. I have introduced this bill to make that potential work for Maine children.

Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) is one of the few programs that exists specifically to help families with children achieve economic security through monthly cash assistance as well as employment and training support.

We want families to have what they need to move beyond mere survival – to get to a place where they can provide safety, stability and *joy* for themselves and their children.

This bill would help provide some of that safety and stability for families, as outlined as a critical approach in Maine’s Child Safety and Family Well-Being Plan³ to reduce child maltreatment and neglect. The plan wisely notes that, “economic security is fundamental to create the conditions for parents and caregivers to safely care for their children.”

Importantly, TANF is also a workforce support. With an aging population and workforce shortage, Maine needs to increase the labor force participation of existing residents, as our state’s 10-year economic development plan⁴ articulates. According to the plan, “people from economically disadvantaged families will be helped to enter the workforce and improve their jobs by Department of Health and Human Services programs that support training, tuition, transportation, childcare and other supportive services.” TANF can support these parents with low-income in pursuing education and training, but only if the program is adequate to help them meet their most basic needs and provide the supports needed to truly help them succeed.

States have broad flexibility to put federal and state TANF dollars to use in the ways that best meets the needs of its families and children. Maine can join other states⁵ in spending a higher percentage of their federal TANF dollars on direct assistance to put more funds into the hands of families, communities and economies in Maine.

If there’s a time to modernize our TANF program, it’s now, when inflation and economic conditions have put rent, utilities, food and other basic needs farther and farther out of reach for families with the lowest incomes.

While Maine’s TANF benefit is indexed, this has translated into very small dollar increases each year (with some recent years as low as an \$8 increase⁶ for a family of 3). Further, these cost of living increases started at a base that was so low that much, much more is needed to bring our benefit to a living standard. That simply can’t be done without a significant increase in the benefit amount itself. The last time Maine’s benefit was increased was in 2017. Our current

³ <https://www.mainelegislature.org/LawMakerWeb/summary.asp?ID=280086593>

⁴ https://www.maine.gov/decd/sites/maine.gov.decd/files/inline-files/DECD_120919_sm.pdf

⁵ https://www.acf.hhs.gov/sites/default/files/documents/ofa/fy2022_tanf_and_moe_financial_data_table-final.pdf

⁶ <https://drive.google.com/drive/folders/1TzMtUFYV8V-zNrbIfA4mbC0JstIxQI-m>

TANF benefit level leaves families far below the poverty line – putting a family of three below 35% of the Federal Poverty Level⁷, i.e., in “deep” or “extreme” poverty.

Increasing our state’s TANF benefit would bring us in line with other New England states. Right now, Maine’s benefit is the lowest in all of New England. TANF benefits in neighboring New Hampshire are just shy of twice the value of what Maine families receive.

When Maine’s families do better, we all do better. LD 1877 will strengthen Maine’s families, communities and our state’s economy, providing Maine parents and kids the shot at long-term economic stability and opportunity we all deserve.

⁷ <https://aspe.hhs.gov/topics/poverty-economic-mobility/poverty-guidelines/prior-hhs-poverty-guidelines-federal-register-references>