



Maine Equal Justice

People Policy Solutions

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Testimony of Oriana Farnham, Maine Equal Justice

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

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Good afternoon. I'm Oriana Farnham, a staff attorney at Maine Equal Justice. I give legal advice and assistance to people across Maine so they can secure public benefits that they're eligible for and that their families rely on to make ends meet. I particularly love working with my TANF clients - I'm not a parent myself, but my TANF clients are. I love talking to them about the opportunities they want to give their kids and their personal goals ranging from becoming plumbers, to getting bachelor's degrees, to running for office like all of you.

With LD 1877, the committee has the chance to help my clients achieve those goals. While my work gives me first-hand insight into why an increase in TANF benefits is so needed, I'll focus today on why we need the bill's changes to simplify ASPIRE support services. These are financial supports for people participating in ASPIRE, TANF's work, education, and training program. LD 1877 would simplify transportation support services and eliminate the need for receipts. This would reduce barriers and paperwork, and give parents more time for their work and training and their kids.

ASPIRE support services help cover expenses like childcare, gas, and car repairs to help TANF participants achieve their family goals. Right now, the barriers to getting support services mean many parents never access them, or they're set back in their goals because of how long it takes to access them. I'll share an example:

To get support services for car repairs, an ASPIRE participant has to make at least 2 trips to the mechanic. First, they have to go get an estimate on the work needed on their car. Then they have to give the estimate to their Fedcap caseworker, who gives it to her supervisor, who then sends it to the Department where another person (who's not a mechanic) decides if the repairs are "necessary." Then, after the participant is approved, they can schedule another appointment with the same mechanic to get the repairs done.

I'm sure most of you can imagine how long this would take given how far out your own mechanic books. For my clients, it's *at best* a 2-4 week process. But recently I had a client

for whom this took 3 months. She got an estimate in July for \$1070 of repairs to get her car to pass inspection. She emailed the estimate to her case manager, who asked if my client could pay the \$70 difference, since ASPIRE only covers up to \$1000/year on car repairs. My client said yes, of course she would—she needed to keep her car running for her family. But her case manager never responded to the email or said another word about it. My client needed to get the work done to drive safely and get a new sticker, so she asked the mechanic when she could get back in to get the repairs done, and they couldn't schedule her until October, a couple days after her sticker expired. Luckily, this client made it work, driving her car in that period without breaking down or getting pulled over for those few days in October, and she stayed in her bachelor's program - on track to graduate this spring and get her LADC certification. But I've had a client in Topsham who lost their job and a client in Augusta who dropped out of school because of car problems while they were waiting for the Department to process the paperwork on their request for support services.

It doesn't have to be this complicated. LD 1877 provides a solution: issue monthly money for gas and yearly money for car costs including repairs. Let parents put the money towards their car, when they need it, and don't waste time with paperwork and requiring state approval to fix a car radiator.

Thank you, and I'm happy to answer any questions about the TANF and ASPIRE programs.