

February 1, 2024

Good afternoon, Senator Baldacci, Representative Meyer, and honorable members of the Health and Human Services Committee:

My name is Kandie Cleaves, and I reside in Garland. I am here today to testify in favor of **LD 1877, An Act to Reduce the Number of Children Living in Deep Poverty by Adjusting Assistance for Low-income Families.**

For over 40 years I have volunteered with a variety of organizations that focus on poverty, such as Community Actions programs, Head Start, The Migrant Council, Maine Association of Interdependent Neighborhoods, Equal Justice Partners Circle and The Maine Highlands Working Community Challenge. For the last 14 years, after living with mental health issues since I was a child, I started to include that focus and am currently the Chair for the Consumer Council System of Maine.

On top of my own lived experience with TANF years ago, all these organizations have given me the opportunity to speak with many people who are or have had to receive state assistance. Over and over, it's reconfirmed that poverty causes harm that eventually money can't buy its way out of and can create generational poverty. The best hope is to stop it from getting a hold of people before it's too late. As a survivor of multiple forms of trauma, who hasn't qualified for assistance for over 10 years, the damage abject poverty left on me, and my family persists more so than other traumas.

I recall one time after my house fire that I was asked to produce documents, ones that I had provided multiple times to the same office, and had just lost in the fire. Rather than getting help through the program in a timely manner, I was expected to jump through

hoops. I shut down, without a Case Manager through my counseling office I wouldn't have gotten the help. Streamlining the programs that serve people in poverty so there is more efficiency could solve issues like that.

An article published November 23, 2023 in Psychology Today, titled "[The Three Faces of Poverty-Related Stress | Psychology Today](#), How financial hardship traps mental health in a cycle of despair" lists four key points:

- Poverty-related stress happens when struggles to meet basic needs cause ongoing mental and emotional strain.
- Poverty-related stress stems from 3 key triggers: noise disturbance, home dysfunction, and financial distress.
- The convergence of these stressors negatively impacts mental health, fueling anxiety, depression, and despair.
- Lifting families out of poverty requires multilayered efforts addressing this complex web of stressors.

Yesterday my daughter signed a new rental agreement, it took her months to find a new place. We all know our state is facing an affordable housing shortage right now, and for people who have very low incomes, like TANF participants, the cost of rent is out of reach. My daughter's rental is in Farmington, a 3-bedroom mobile and she will be paying \$2000/month. If she still relied on TANF she would still be looking. Even being able to pay that much per month it was hard to find a rental, imagine how hard it would be if you were living on TANF at current levels. But this committee can do something about this today. LD 1877 would get more funds to families so they can stay housed and keep food on the table.

If you want to reduce mental health issues and you want people working, then help raise families out of abject poverty, voting in favor of LD 1877 is a step in the right direction.

I've included one other article below I feel would be useful. Thank you for your time.

Kandie Cleaves

[The Poverty-Related Stress Scale: Development and Validation of a Multidimensional Measure Assessing Poverty-Related Stressors \(hindawi.com\)](#)