



Maine Equal Justice
People Policy Solutions

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MEJ Testimony *Opposed* to certain proposals within the DHHS sections of LD 2214 "An Act to Make Supplemental Appropriations and Allocations from the General Fund and Other Funds for the Expenditures of State Government and to Change Certain Provisions of the Law Necessary to the Proper Operations of State Government for the Fiscal Years Ending June 30, 2024 and June 30, 2025"

February 26, 2024

Good morning, Senator Rotundo, Senator Baldacci, Representative Sachs, Representative Meyer, members of the Appropriations and Financial Affairs Committee, and members of the Health and Human Services Committee. My name is Kathy Kilrain del Rio, I use she/her pronouns, and I'm the Advocacy and Programs Director for Maine Equal Justice, a nonprofit legal aid provider working to increase economic security, opportunity, and equity for people in Maine. We are disappointed to be testifying in opposition today due to several harmful sections in the supplemental budget proposal before.

Harmful Changes to General Assistance

General Assistance (GA) is a lifeline for Mainers experiencing the greatest economic stress – it is the safety net of last resort. GA is essential in supporting many people in communities all across Maine in meeting their basic needs. Because it is such a critically important program, **we are supportive of the \$5 million investment in the program in General Assistance – Reimbursement to Cities & Towns Line 0130.** I'd also like to note that you have a bill on the Special Appropriations Table, LD 1664, that could address other concerns around reimbursement for municipalities that can lead to people in need not being able to access assistance.

We are very concerned that the proposal in Part II of the language section will lead to increased evictions and more people becoming unhoused. This proposal limits municipalities' ability to exceed the maximums for GA in an emergency to just initial applicants and to just 30 days in a 12-month period. Under current law, when a person can't meet their basic needs in an emergency, the municipality is able to exceed the GA maximums if needed. As you likely know, the GA maximums are not adequate in many cases to keep a roof over a family's head and food on the table and this challenge has worsened with the housing crisis and rising costs of rent across the state. Limiting this option to initial applicants or to just 30 days in a 12-month period ignores the reality that many Mainers with the lowest incomes may experience an emergency at any time, and often at multiple times. It is not uncommon for the emergency to continue for

multiple months. Quite simply, more people will experience homelessness if this proposal remains in the supplemental budget.

We understand the concern is increasing costs for GA. If that is the case, this is not the solution. Restricting the flexibility of municipalities to meet their resident's needs won't reduce costs to the state, municipalities, or impacted people in the long-term. Those costs will just be shifted to emergency shelter costs, Housing First, and all the other supports individuals and families need once they become unhoused. Losing housing often results in an economic insecurity spiral. When individuals and families are unhoused, everything becomes harder, including going to school, maintaining or finding employment, maintaining good health, getting adequate and healthy nutrition, recovering from substance use, and so much more. Adequately supporting Mainers when they are experiencing an emergency is the right thing to do and it is also the financially smart thing to do.

If you seek to save money in a meaningful way that does not harm Mainers, we recommend investing in supports that address the challenges people are facing in accessing affordable health care, putting food on the table, and keeping their home. One solution would be investing in rent relief for the lowest-income Mainers (those at or below 30% area median income). This would help older Mainers on fixed incomes, some people with disabilities, single parents with caregiving responsibilities, and many other working low-wage jobs. You could use LD 1540 on the Special Appropriations Table to do this – though we would strongly recommend amending it to ensure it targets assistance to those most at risk of eviction and homelessness.

I also wish to express disappointment that this proposal circumvents the process undertaken in the HHS Committee since last year to deeply consider the challenges with the GA program and thoughtfully propose solutions. If the Administration wanted to propose this, they could have done so during that process.

Finally, we understand based on testimony from Greg Payne on the Housing sections on Friday that the Administration would prefer to use the Emergency Housing Relief Fund to address individuals' housing needs in an emergency. We do not oppose the Administration working with municipalities to utilize the Emergency Housing Relief Fund for emergencies; however, we do oppose taking away municipalities' flexibility and ability to exceed the maximums in emergencies to ensure no one slips through the cracks and because we don't know that a future Administration would have the same commitment to using the Emergency Housing Relief Fund in this way.

For all these reasons, we urge you to vote out Part II and support the creation of a rental assistance program for the Mainers with the lowest incomes.

Cuts to Food Assistance

The proposal in part QQ, which repeals state-Funded SNAP benefits for certain immigrants who have work authorization but have not yet secured employment, is egregious. We should be

doing all we can to ensure Maine people – whatever their background – have adequate nutrition. As a matter of fact, the legislature supported creating the Ending Hunger by 2030 initiative in previous legislative sessions for just this reason. Maine Equal Justice is proud to be a part of this work that is currently housed in the Governor's Office of Policy Innovation and the Future (GOPIF).

It is also hypocritical to be proposing an Office of New Americans focused on supporting immigrants in Maine in joining our workforce while proposing taking away food assistance, which is a proven support for work. Immigrants are important to our families, schools, and institutions of faith, and communities regardless of their labor and as people making Maine their home should have support in meeting their basic needs just like people who are not immigrants. It is also true that most adult immigrants want to work and are eager for employment in many of our essential industries. However, this proposal fails to take into account that people aren't often able to find adequate employment on the same day they get a work permit. It takes time to find work for many reasons, and people may also lose employment for varied reasons. For example, we have worked with many clients who were employed at Abbott Laboratories who lost employment when the company decreased their production of COVID tests. If this proposal had been in place, then the same people who were working to help keep us safe during the pandemic would then be forced to go without food when they lost employment because of changing testing needs.

We shouldn't be trying to save money by taking food away from immigrants. It's wrong and previous legislatures have stood against these types of cuts. **We urge you to do the same by voting out Part QQ.**

Health Care

This administration has demonstrated a commitment to improving access to affordable health care, most meaningfully through the expansion of MaineCare. However, the Governor's proposed supplemental budget threatens to tarnish that legacy, rolling back and leaving out critical resources for historically marginalized, low-income people in our state.

Cuts to the Medicare Savings Program

Last year the legislature took bold steps to support the health and economic security of older Mainers by increasing the income eligibility for the Medicare Savings Program (MSP). We, along with many organizations, celebrated the improvements passed last year for this critical program which helps people over 65 with lower incomes pay for Medicare costs. One of our paralegals even cried when it passed because she had worked with so many older people—many on fixed incomes and with disabilities—who were just over the income threshold to qualify for MSP, but still could not afford their health care premiums and often struggled to meet their basic needs.

The new law directed the state to implement higher eligibility levels for MSP which it has thus far failed to do. Now this budget attempts to roll back the progress that was made and deny tens of thousands of older Mainers the help they were promised. This is not only unfair, but it's also harmful, and Maine would forgo tens of millions of matching dollars for a modest investment of state funds. We strongly oppose these cuts and ask you to carry out the will of the legislature and implement the new eligibility guidelines as written in statute. Many Mainers are counting the days to March when this expanded eligibility was supposed to go into effect. Every day that passes means a missed medical screening, a prescription drug cut in half, or a trade-off with food or a home repair for an older Mainer who is struggling to afford their health care.

We urge you to reject the cuts in Part NN and move to make progress on the many pressing issues that require your attention and our state's investment.

All Mainers Deserve Health Care

One of the most impactful investments the state can make for health equity is to remove exclusions in the MaineCare program based on immigration status and allow all Mainers who are income eligible to get the health care they need. Sadly, the supplemental budget lacks funding to support more equitable access to MaineCare, discounting the urgent needs of many low-income parents, elders, and working-age adults based solely on their immigration status.

There is enormous emphasis on immigrants joining our shrinking workforce, but very little attention to the supports that individuals and families need to be healthy and successful. Immigrants in Maine make up a higher share of the labor force than they do the total population of the state. They are filling jobs in key industries including agriculture, direct care, tourism, and health care and the latest numbers show immigrants pay upwards of \$198 million in state and local taxes annually.¹ Yet, those who are delivering care, picking and serving our food, contributing to our economy, and paying into our public benefit programs are unable to access that same assistance when they need it.

This is shameful. Amid global conflicts and the skyrocketing cost of living, and within the context of a budget surplus and a full Budget Stabilization Fund, the very least we can do is end the continued exclusion of many immigrants from being able to see a doctor or fill a prescription when they're sick.

We continue to urge you to act to remove exclusions in MaineCare based on immigration status.

Strengthening Oral Health

MEJ has long worked to increase access to oral health care for Mainers across their lives. One challenge is a lack of staff at the Department focused on oral health who can help develop solutions to our oral health workforce challenges. A bill on the Special Appropriations Table, LD 1837, would help address this by making permanent within the Maine Center for Disease

¹ <https://map.americanimmigrationcouncil.org/locations/maine/#>

Control and Prevention's office of rural health and primary care the positions of oral health educator and data and research analyst. It has been a challenge to fill these positions given their temporary nature. We believe someone with oral health expertise would be more interested in these roles if they were ongoing.

We ask that you include the position in LD 1837 in the supplemental budget.

Rollbacks for Child Care / Early Learning

Maine Equal Justice supported the important improvements to our child care/early learning system enacted in last year's biennial budget. We are concerned to see those rolled back in the Governor's proposed supplemental budget. In particular, we oppose the following proposed changes that would weaken the positive steps the state has taken to support families in need of child care *and* our child care workforce.

- Part SS delays implementation of the changes to income eligibility for child care subsidies in the Child Care Affordability Program from January 1, 2024 until July 1, 2024. Families expected and were counting on this expansion beginning on January 1st, 2024. To delay this initiative ignores the severity of our child care crisis and means Maine families will continue to face challenges in affording and accessing child care for longer than should be the case.
- Part TT delays the implementation of including child care staff in the Maine Child Care Affordability Program until July 1, 2024 and changes the program to be a 2- year pilot program. As noted above, child care programs and educators have been anticipating the start of this program as intended in law and furthermore, were anticipating a permanent program (also as intended in law), and not a time limited, piloted program. This legislation passed because it was recognized as an important step forward in recruiting and retaining the child care workforce.
- Child Care Services Line 0563 fails to carry forward \$4.4 million in funding for monthly child care stipends. These funds should be carried through to ensure full implementation of the wage supplement program.

We ask you to join us in opposing Part SS, Part TT, and Child Care Services Line 0563.

A Strong State Workforce

MEJ works closely with multiple state agencies and especially with DHHS. Strong state government is necessary for our safety net programs to run smoothly and meet the needs of low-income Mainers. Our state workers are the backbone of state government. As you are all aware, promptness is a vital consideration in delivering safety net services to older Mainers, families with children, and others in need, and is a concern we hear often from the people with low-income with whom we work. In particular, wait-times for speaking with an eligibility specialist in the Office of Family Independence (OFI) can often be hours long. **For these reasons, we strongly support the additional OFI positions proposed in Line 0453.**

At the same time, we know the difficulties recruiting and maintaining staff for these important positions in part due to the pay gap for state workers. For state positions to be competitive and attract and keep a strong workforce, the state must increase salaries and end the pay gap. Without that shift in compensation, we are skeptical that these new positions will be fully filled. **We ask that you support efforts to address the pay gap such as LD 2121, which is currently in the State and Local Government Committee.**

Conclusion

Thank you for the opportunity to share our thoughts with you today. Maine Equal Justice can be available at any of your work sessions and I'm happy to answer any questions you have today.