



126 Sewall Street
Augusta, ME 04330-6822
TTY/Voice: (207) 626-7058
Fax: (207) 621-8148
www.mejp.org

Maine Equal Justice
People Policy Solutions

Ann Danforth
Senior Policy Advocate
(207) 626-7058 x216
adanforth@mejp.org

Testimony on behalf of Maine Equal Justice in support of LD 85 *An Act to Revitalize the Maine Temporary Assistance for Needy Families Advisory Council*

February 5, 2025

Good afternoon Senator Ingwersen, Representative Meyer, and Members of the Committee on Health and Human Services. My name is Ann Danforth and I use she/her pronouns. I'm a Senior Policy Advocate at Maine Equal Justice (MEJ), a nonprofit civil legal aid provider working to increase economic security, opportunity, and equity for people in Maine.

I'm here today to testify in strong support of LD 85, An Act to Revitalize the Maine Temporary Assistance for Needy Families Advisory Council.

Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) and its employment and training program, ASPIRE, are key social infrastructure and workforce support programs in our state. TANF/ASPIRE provides critical support for families with children, enabling them to make ends meet. It also provides parents with the opportunity to pursue education and training that can help lift families out of poverty, and at the same time, strengthen our state's workforce.

Maine Equal Justice has worked to improve the TANF program in Maine since its inception in 1996. Over the years, we have worked to help pass legislation that creates more opportunities and pathways out of poverty for TANF participants, including by helping to create the Parents as Scholars (PaS) and Higher Opportunity for Pathways to Employment (HOPE) programs; increasing the TANF benefit amount; reducing the "benefits cliff"; enhancing transitional support services; creating more robust outcomes metrics related to TANF/ASPIRE that are now reported on through the LIFT report delivered to this committee; and more.

Through our organizing work with MEJ's TANF/ASPIRE Leadership Team members – a group of single moms who have participated in TANF and work with MEJ to inform and advocate for our policy priorities – we know well that the most important voices in how TANF functions are those of participants. We also know how important it is to compensate people with lived experience for the time and the expertise they bring. Too often, the people bringing the most lived experience to an advisory council, taskforce, or commission are the only people at the table not being compensated for their time there - since everyone else is participating as part of their job. Their experience is essential to fully understand the way programs work for the people who they are meant to serve so we should be compensating them for that expertise.

LD 85 would authorize reimbursement and compensation for TANF Advisory Council members with lived experience. This would make it more likely that TANF parents will be able to participate given their financial and time constraints. It also sends an important signal that we value and need their input.

We believe it is long overdue to revitalize the TANF Advisory Council. We hope this revitalized Council will be a place where members can weigh in on important issues related to TANF/ASPIRE – including how participants feel they are being treated and supported by Fedcap in meeting their career and individual goals; how TANF/ASPIRE can be further strengthened to better meet the needs of families and our state's workforce; and how TANF funds are being prioritized and spent in Maine.

Thank you for your time and I'm happy to answer any questions you may have.

Ann Danforth