



Maine Equal Justice
People Policy Solutions

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MEJ Testimony on certain proposals within the DHHS sections of LD 210 *"An Act Making Unified Appropriations and Allocations from the General Fund and Other Funds for the Expenditures of State Government and Changing Certain Provisions of the Law Necessary to the Proper Operations of State Government for the Fiscal Years Ending June 30, 2025, June 30, 2026 and June 30, 2027"*

February 24, 2024

Good afternoon, Senator Rotundo, Senator Ingwerson, Representative Gattine, 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 on several harmful proposals in the Biennial Budget and also in support of another proposal.

Oppose Cuts to State-Funded SNAP & TANF

The proposal in part VV, which repeals state-funded SNAP and TANF benefits for certain immigrants who have work authorization but have not yet secured employment, is of deep concern to MEJ. We should be doing all we can to ensure Maine people – whatever their background – have adequate nutrition and can meet their most basic needs. Your committees and the legislature understood this last year and rejected a similar proposal in the proposed 2024 supplemental budget. We urge you to reject this expanded proposal as well.

Immigrants are important to our families, schools, institutions of faith, and communities regardless of their labor. As people making Maine their home, asylum seekers 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 their work permit. It takes time to find work for many reasons, including navigating various industries, finding jobs that match skills or figuring out credentialing, language barriers, and discrimination. People may also lose employment for varied reasons. For example, we 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 or other basic needs for their children when they lost employment because of reduced testing needs.

Investing in food security and the basic needs of all Mainers, including those who are seeking employment when they first get their work permit or unexpectedly lose their job, is an investment in the health and wellbeing of Maine families and our workforce. ***We urge you to vote out Part VV.***

Oppose Cuts to General Assistance

We understand that the proposal in Part S of the Supplemental Budget (LD 209) was moved out of the Supplemental Budget with the intention to discuss it as part of this Biennial Budget. For that reason, we are including testimony on that proposal here. We are deeply concerned with any proposals that would cut access to General Assistance or reduce its ability to respond to the needs of Mainers in crisis. We also want to remind your committees that last year, the legislature passed a bill that required DHHS to create a database for GA and to begin providing a report about key metrics for GA to the HHS committee beginning in January 2026. ***We urge you to wait for that report so that you can consider what the data tells us about the needs of the lowest-income Mainers and work with stakeholders to determine what policy changes can improve the program rather than demolish it.***

General Assistance (GA) is a necessary support for very low-income Mainers whose income does not allow them to pay for basic needs like housing, food, prescriptions, electricity, and heat. It is the “safety net of last resort” but that net has holes in it, and the proposal in the budget creates harmful changes to the program. The proposal to limit GA to a maximum of three months in a 12-month period per household is harmful and fails to provide alternatives for low-income families. This will result in more individuals and families in every county becoming unhoused. While it is being described as a cost-saving measure, it only shifts costs to more expensive supports that are necessary when people become unhoused.

Since GA is the program of last resort, recipients must prove that they have exhausted all other resources before receiving GA benefits. Once a recipient receives GA, there are caps (maximums) on specific assistance types that are categorized such as utilities, medical, housing, etc. To remain in good standing, recipients must make good-faith efforts to reduce their need for GA. Any cuts to GA that do not come with a clear alternative to provide similar assistance will result in people becoming unhoused or unable to meet their most basic needs like putting food on the table or paying for heat.

Maine Equal Justice strongly opposes the proposal in Part S of the Supplemental Budget, and we oppose including it in the Biennial Budget. Rather than creating limitations and restrictions to GA to alleviate pressure on the program, there need to be alternative affordable, accessible housing supports. Because the Mainers affected by this proposal are already in housing, the loss of this assistance without alternative supports will result in an increase in evictions. In just 2023, 6,000 Maine households faced eviction, increasing the eviction total by 16 percent from

the previous year. We should be doing all we can to reduce those numbers, not increase them. This proposal will also harm those who are not yet housed from utilizing GA to attain housing since landlords will be reluctant to accept tenants with such a short period of assistance while they get back on their feet. For these and the many reasons you've heard from others who oppose this proposal, **we urge you to reject any effort to include this proposal or other cuts to GA in LD 210.**

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 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.

A bill that is not yet printed, LR 196, would improve access to MaineCare for some immigrants currently facing exclusions. We urge you to consider adding language from this bill to the budget to continue to demonstrate to Mainers who are immigrants that their health and the vital roles they play in communities across the state are valued. ***We continue to urge you to act to remove exclusions in MaineCare based on immigration status.***

Protect Access to Reproductive Health Care

Reproductive health care is essential for the overall health of many Mainers and the state's family planning network is vital to making access to these services possible. Reproductive health care includes testing and treatment for sexually transmitted infections, birth control, cancer screenings, routine gynecological exams and care and well person care, vaccinations, gender-affirming care, and behavioral health services. That care is provided through four Planned Parenthood of Northern New England (PPNNE) health centers, 18 Maine Family Planning (MFP) health centers, 31 Federally Qualified Health Centers, and eight school-based health centers. These services are especially important for low-income Mainers who may struggle to access care in other settings.

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

There is a bill, LD 143, that will be considered this session that we would urge you to consider including in the budget. It would provide \$6.18 million to Maine's family planning care network that serves more than 31,000 patients annually, 70% of whom qualified for free or reduced cost care. ***We ask that you include funding for these critical services in the budget.***

Strengthening Oral Health

MEJ has long worked to increase access to oral health care for Mainers across their lives. One challenge has been a lack of staff at the Department focused on oral health who can help develop solutions to our oral health workforce challenges. That's why we are very pleased to see the initiative in Part A at the bottom of page 343 that "continues and makes permanent one Public Health Educator III position and one Planning and Research Associate I position previously continued by Financial Order CV0733 F5 to support oral health services provided in Maine schools and provides funding for related All Other costs." ***We urge you to vote in the last initiative on page 343 of Part A.***

A Strong Fund for a Healthy Maine

We join others in expressing appreciation for the Administration's commitment to public health and prevention programs. We were, however, surprised to see the proposal to move multiple public health focused programs out of the Fund for a Health Maine. We believe maintaining the Fund as a space for investments in public health makes sense and can be achieved by moving additional revenue to the Fund or by moving some of the MaineCare services being paid for by the Fund now into the General Fund. We're happy to continue to work with both your committees and partners in the public health community to find a pathway to maintain the long-term goals of the Fund for a Health Maine in supporting our public health and prevention needs.

Investments in Rates and COLAs

When Maine changed how we approach rate-setting and Cost of Living Adjustments in recent legislative session, MEJ applauded that thoughtful new approach that was meant to assure providers of certain increases and would make more transparent the process to review and change rates going forward. While our organization is not a provider, we understand that the financial stability of providers is essential to maintain adequate access to critical health care needs for MaineCare members. We join with many you have heard from in hearing on both the Supplemental and Biennial Budgets in urging your committees to look at ways to fund expected COLA increases and continue to invest in the rate reform as needed. This could be done both through utilizing monies in the Budget Stabilization Fund and by supporting policies that adjust our tax system to ensure that those who are wealthy and big corporations are paying their fair share. Continued investment in our health care system is an investment in the physical and mental health of our residents, and also an investment in our workforce.

A Robust 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. For state positions to be competitive and attract and keep a strong workforce, the state must increase salaries and end the pay gap. Therefore, we support proposals in the budget that strengthen our state workforce and ask you to look at other opportunities to make progress on ending the pay gap for state workers.

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.

Senator Rotundo, Senator Ingwersen, Representative Cattine, Representative Meyer and esteemed members of the Committees on Appropriations and Financial Affairs and Health and Human Services:

The 72 undersigned organizations write to express unified support for our families, colleagues, clients, patients, and partners who are immigrants. Together, we stand for their equal opportunity to meet their basic needs through public assistance programs, including MaineCare, the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), and Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF).

We join in opposition to the Governor's proposed cuts to state-funded SNAP and TANF for non-citizens in her biennial budget—a proposal that was largely rejected by the legislature during the last supplemental budget cycle, and one that would make it harder for people to find work and put food on the table. Furthermore, these state-funded benefits for certain noncitizens are already extremely limited. They are intended to bridge the gap between permission to work and finding or losing a job when people don't have the means to purchase essentials like food. Unlike federally-funded benefits, those who meet the 'hardship exemption' for unemployment lose their SNAP and TANF as soon as they are employed, regardless of their income, family size, or when their first check arrives.

Work authorization alone does not automatically translate to an available job, and immigrants in Maine often face additional barriers to employment, including language, the need for credentials, and discrimination. Cuts to grocery benefits and education and training supports will only create more barriers to workforce participation for new Mainers and deepen food and housing insecurity in our state. This proposal undermines the wellbeing of adults and children alike, eroding the stability necessary for families to build a strong foundation for the future.

The State benefits from immigrants staffing our businesses, picking our food, caring for our elders, and paying taxes to fund our state and local governments. Yet, many of the same people fueling our economy are ineligible for the same public benefits they help pay for based solely on their immigration status. As organizations that fight for health and economic justice for all in Maine, we are troubled by the inclination to further limit food assistance and essential supports for the lowest-income families who have the least available resources. There are other policy options available to fund our public benefit programs, and slashing access to nutrition and other basic needs should never be a place to seek savings.

If we share the goal of ending hunger in Maine and building a strong workforce, we must invest in the whole person, recognizing their inherent value beyond their economic contributions or their immigration status.

At a time when immigrants are scapegoated and under attack by our federal government, Maine can chart a different course. In Maine, we believe *everyone* deserves food, health care, child care, a roof over their heads, and the support they need to lead healthy and productive

lives. In Maine, we take care of our neighbors, we stand up for our autonomy as a state, we don't acquiesce to federal pressure, and we don't support discrimination. That is who we are. That is the collective future we want.

We, the undersigned, urge you to reject the proposal in Language Part VV of LD 210, which would repeal the unemployment hardship exemption for state-funded SNAP and TANF benefits. Instead, we ask you to more equitably invest in services that benefit the most economically disadvantaged in our state and to speak up in defense of Maine's immigrant communities.

Sincerely,

American Heart Association
Career Planning Services
Community Organizing Alliance
Consumers for Affordable Healthcare
Cultivating Community
Cumberland County Food Security Council
Cumberland County Greens
Defend Our Health
Etna-Dixmont School
Food AND Medicine
Frannie Peabody Center
Frith Farm
Full Plates Full Potential
Good Shepherd Food Bank
Grandmothers for Reproductive Rights (GRR!)
Greater Portland Family Promise
Growing to Give
Hand in Hand/Mano en Mano
High Street Food Pantry
Homeless Voices for Justice
Hope Acts
Immigrant Legal Advocacy Project
In Her Presence
InterRooted
Khmer Maine
La Finca
Ladder to the Moon Network
Land in Common
Leukemia and Lymphoma Society
Mabel Wadsworth Center
Maine Access Immigrant Network
Maine Association for the Education of Young Children
Maine Center for Economic Policy
Maine Chapter, American Academy of Pediatrics
Maine Children's Alliance
Maine Community Integration
Maine Conservation Voters

Maine Council of Churches
Maine Council On Aging
Maine Equal Justice
Maine Family Planning
Maine Food Convergence Project
Maine Immigrants' Rights Coalition (MIRC)
Maine Medical Association + Maine Osteopathic Association
Maine MultiCulturalCenter
Maine Network of Community Food Councils
Maine Organic Farmers and Gardeners Association
Maine People's Alliance
Maine Unitarian Universalist State Advocacy Network
Maine Women's Lobby
Maine Youth for Climate Justice
Maine Youth Power
Mainers for Humane Immigration
Merrymeeting Food Council
Mid Coast Hunger Prevention Program
Mid Coast New Mainers Group
Midcoast Literacy
New Mainers Resource Center
PeaceWorks
Planned Parenthood of Northern New England
Preble Street
Present! Maine
ProsperityME
Resources for Organizing and Social Change
SAFE Maine
Somali Bantu Community Association
Southern Maine Workers' Center
Spring Day Creamery, LLC
The Whole Almond
Whatley Farm
Wild Fruitings
YWCA Central Maine