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Testimony of the Office for Family Independence
Maine Department of Health and Human Services

Before the Joint Standing Committee on Health and Human Services

In opposition to LD 943,
An Act to Require the ASPIRE-TANF Program to Be Administered by State Employees

Sponsor: Representative Archer
Hearing Date: April 3, 2025

Senator Ingwersen, Representative Meyer, and members of the Joint Standing Committee on Health and Human Services, my name is Ian Yaffe, and I serve as the Director of the Office for Family Independence (OFI) in the Maine Department of Health and Human Services. I am here today to testify in opposition to LD 943, *An Act to Require the ASPIRE-TANF Program to Be Administered by State Employees*.

The proposed legislation seeks to prevent the Department from partnering with a non-governmental agency for certain Additional Support for People in Retraining and Education (ASPIRE) services. ASPIRE helps participants in the Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) program move toward financial independence through case management, job training, education, support, and employment services. The bill further directs the Department to submit a new annual report to the Legislature regarding the ASPIRE program and prematurely terminates existing partnerships at the end of next year.

The Department is dedicated to promoting health, safety, resilience, and opportunity for Maine people. Consistent with our mission, we are also committed to making meaningful and sustainable improvements to programming where there are opportunities and resources to do so. While I acknowledge that the ASPIRE program certainly faces challenges in meeting its full potential for supporting participants, I don't want to lose sight of the significant improvements we've made in the past few years, or of the improvements that continue to be underway today.

The ASPIRE program is currently in the midst of a transition from a program focused solely on federal work participation rate requirements (WPR) to a program that supports long-term family stability and sustainability. This proposal would negatively impact this work by immediately starting a new transition period. And, changing the person that provides some of the ASPIRE services from an employee of a non-profit agency to an employee of the State would not automatically improve services.

Disruption of the current program administration model, which is a partnership between the Department and Fedcap, the entity that currently holds the contract following the state

procurement process, would disrupt program advancements that have already been made and set program administration back. To start, the timeline for a transition would be lengthy and unpredictable. Once there is legislative approval and funding for state positions, the time it takes to hire qualified individuals varies greatly across the State and it can take months to fill a position after the posting has closed. Once the positions have been filled, expansive training and onboarding will take additional time. As an example, OFI worked hard to post the Eligibility Specialist positions that were included in the 2025 Supplemental Budget on the very first day that we were authorized to do so last August. After going through the hiring and training process, those staff are only now just beginning to process applications and renewals.

The Department made the decision to administer many ASPIRE services through a competitive procurement opportunity beginning in 2015. This decision followed over \$20.2 million in federal fines due to the poor performance of the ASPIRE program and resulting failures to meet federal requirements. The Department recently reevaluated that decision in 2021, incorporating ongoing feedback about quality and performance in the now-prior contract. Ahead of the expiration of that prior contract, the Department issued a Request for Proposals in 2022 with a revised vision of the program and performance expectations. Following a competitive procurement process, Fedcap was awarded a new contract that began in October 2023.

Much of our desired improvements in the ASPIRE program, consistent with our expectation to shift the program to a focus on long-term family stability and sustainability, are still in progress. That being said, we are also already beginning to see results. The program has become more focused on the whole family, understanding that challenges within the family affect employability and long-term stability. We have incorporated trauma-informed and culturally appropriate methods and services to enhance the effectiveness of the program. We have emphasized education that leads to more sustainable employment with opportunities for growth. The overall focus of the program has shifted to services that lead to sustainable, long-term success for Maine families.

These changes are embodied in the new contract for ASPIRE services, which outlines the Department's expectations in these areas, as well as containing key monthly benchmarks and performance metrics. New metrics include specifics regarding participants that experienced domestic violence, homelessness, and have been justice involved; those with behavior health needs; and those that have limited English language proficiency. Additional new metrics specifically cite education, employment with employer-provided benefits, multiple levels of employment retention, employment with wages exceeding the State's minimum wage, and case closures due to earnings from employment. Data from the first quarter of the 2025 contract year has demonstrated some positive results—an average of 80% of employment secured over that time period has employer-sponsored benefits; over 83% of employment secured pays greater than Maine's minimum wage; 82% of closures have been due to earnings from employment; and job retention at one, three, and six months are all well above the established 50% threshold. Data has also demonstrated some areas in need of improvement—we need to enhance our two-parent family work participation rate; we need to do a better job of ensuring those without High School equivalency are engaged in education services; and a major area of focus is our limited English proficiency families. We are very close to meeting the performance metric in that category but are not quite there.

We are seeing preliminary positive results from the surveys conducted by the independent contractor associated with the LIFT report. Close to 90% of current participants report that they agree or strongly agree that they are overall satisfied with their ASPIRE activities, and almost 75% of current participants rate Fedcap staff as being easy to call or contact. We are seeing noticeable differences in survey responses between current and former participants, with current participants indicating greater satisfaction with the program than former participants. I would emphasize that these are preliminary, and we look forward to sharing further information on this when the full LIFT report is presented to this Committee later this session.

The Department continues to make meaningful improvements based on the lessons learned when our contractor didn't meet our, their own, and participants' expectations. We remain committed to Maine families and dedicated to constantly improving the program to improve the lives of those served by the ASPIRE program. We share the same ultimate definition of success here, which is that families will be equipped with the support, the tools, and the knowledge to overcome challenges and to reach sustainable, long-term success—ultimately leading to reduced dependence on public assistance programs.

The financial burden of transitioning program administration and subsequent program operation would be significant without substantive benefit given how many improvements are already being made to the program currently. As the bill indicates, there are certain services that are outside the scope of OFI's expertise and would still need to be contracted, which would require new competitive procurement instruments. Those services have increased in expense over the last decade, and the cost of personnel and other staff-related expenses has as well.

Lastly, I wanted to note that the required report in the proposed legislation is duplicative of the "LIFT" report, which is already required pursuant to 22 MRSA § 3109. An interim report will be submitted this month along with a final report, including survey responses, which will be submitted later in the session.

Our team always welcomes ideas and efforts to improve the ASPIRE program. We share the aspiration to continually seek to provide better services to Maine families and appreciate the discussion. The proposals in this legislation simply would not move us in that direction but rather would take us a step backward and delay further improvements. Thank you for your time and attention. I would be happy to answer any questions you may have and to make myself available for questions at the work session.