

Testimony of Beth White
Maine Service Employees Association, SEIU Local 1989

In Support of LD 943, An Act to Require the ASPIRE-TANF Program to be Administered by State Employees, sponsored by Representative Marshall Archer

**Before the Joint Standing Committee on Health and Human Services,
April 3, 2025, 2 PM, Cross Office Building Room 209, and Electronically**

Senator Ingwersen, Representative Meyer, members of the Committee on Health and Human Services, I'm Beth White, Director of Politics and Legislation for the Maine Service Employees Association, Local 1989 of the Service Employees International Union. The Maine Service Employees Association represents over 13,000 workers across the state, including workers at the Maine Department of Health and Human Services (DHHS).

We're here today in support of LD 943, which would require DHHS to administer the Additional Support for People in Retraining and Employment – Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (ASPIRE-TANF) program, with department employees. It proposes the phasing out of contracted public and private agencies providing program services by December 31, 2026, except for certain service delivery functions including job training and education, employment support, childcare assistance, and transportation assistance.

TANF-ASPIRE are key social infrastructure and workforce support programs providing critical support for families with children, enabling them to make ends meet, providing parents with the opportunity to pursue education and training that can help lift families out of poverty. At the same time, TANF-ASPIRE strengthens Maine's workforce. These programs are essential and we strongly believe that they should be delivered by state employees. Requiring TANF-ASPIRE case management and initial assessments to be done by DHHS employees will ensure participants can receive services at their local DHHS office, or at other local service providers in the area that the Department might hire for tasks they're not equipped to handle (such as ESL or GED classes). From our understanding, turnover at Fedcap is high and results in participants not receiving critical information about services they're receiving. It also would allow for better communication; many of the participants in the TANF-ASPIRE program access other state services as well, and having case management services under DHHS would allow for better coordination of support services.

Beginning in 2016, Maine contracted out ASPIRE services to Fedcap, a private multimillion dollar international nonprofit; prior to 2016, ASPIRE services were provided by state employees

working under the DHHS. This was done as a supposed “cost saving” measure; however, since it was contracted out, the services have suffered and the costs have been high. Our union was strongly opposed to this move in 2016; at the bottom of my testimony, I’ve included an article from our union newspaper, *Maine Stater*, dated February 18, 2016, highlighting our concerns with the privatization of ASPIRE services. Many of the concerns we raised in 2016 have become reality.

Not only did the privatization of ASPIRE-TANF cost over 50 state employees their jobs but it also has caused harm for many participants. Long waits for support services, poor communication, being secretive about support services and resources that could help, and discouraging people from pursuing education are just a few of the concerns raised by participants in the program. Additionally, the lack of accountability over Fedcap has resulted in a lack of government efficiency. The State has even had to hire additional state employees to oversee Fedcap due to its inefficiencies. Data has shown that Fedcap’s administration of ASPIRE has resulted in low job retention rates, participant wages below the poverty level, and dramatically high sanction rates that result in family hardship and lost opportunity.

Bringing ASPIRE-TANF services back under DHHS would be beneficial for all Mainers; participants, employees, and taxpayers alike. For that reason, we strongly support LD 943. Thank you and I would be happy to answer any questions.

Maine Stater
Feb. 18, 2016

Privatization scheme threatens jobs of up to 70 workers in ASPIRE program
We’re demanding impact bargaining as we enforce our contractual rights

MSEA-SEIU Chief Steward and ASPIRE Specialist Sharon Carroll has worked for the State of Maine for 31 years, mostly for Maine DHHS, including nearly 18 years with the ASPIRE program. She plans to retire later this year. So you could imagine her surprise and disappointment Jan. 15 when management disclosed it intends to privatize the ASPIRE program.

Privatization would disrupt the lives of up to 70 workers in the ASPIRE program and potentially put the program’s operations in the control of a for-profit, out-of-state company.

Maine DHHS is doing a great disservice to Maine people by seeking bids to privatize ASPIRE, Sharon said. Workers in the ASPIRE program connect Maine people receiving Temporary Assistance to Needy Families (TANF) with the community, educational, job and support services

and resources they need to get back on their feet. This could involve completing a high school equivalency degree, taking adult education courses, undergoing technical training, volunteering in the community, getting job training and ultimately finding a job.

The ASPIRE workers also help line up transportation as needed. Transportation can be a real problem for many people receiving TANF, particularly if they only have one car and there are problems with it. There can be other complications as well. Some Mainers in the ASPIRE program have disabilities. Some are experiencing mental health issues. Some are dealing with domestic violence in their households. Others are dealing with substance abuse issues.

While the challenges are many, Maine's ASPIRE workers recently received national recognition for their work. Two days before the privatization scheme was announced, Maine's ASPIRE Program was ranked second best in the nation for single-parent household participation.

Several Mainers who started out as clients of the Aspire program are now working for the Aspire program, including one as an Aspire supervisor. "There are so many success stories," Sharon said. "I've been doing this program for 17 and a half years."

Sharon noted the privatization scheme also shows what little respect the department has for Maine DHHS workers. As a chief steward, she is working with her coworkers and others who could be affected to make sure they understand their contractual rights.

The administration's privatization scheme has been shrouded in secrecy for months. Management's request for proposals to privatize the ASPIRE program includes a date stamp on each page showing it was revised in July 2015. The issue of contracting-out state services is a standing item on the agenda of the Maine DHHS Labor-Management Committee on which Sharon serves as our labor chair. The committee met monthly for most of 2015, yet it wasn't until the Feb. 2, 2016, labor-management meeting that management acknowledged its privatization scheme at a meeting of the Maine DHHS Statewide Labor-Management Committee. Sharon holds the DHHS commissioner's office responsible for the secrecy.

On Feb. 9, our union demanded impact bargaining with management over management's plan to privatize operations of the ASPIRE program. In our demand, we requested any and all materials relating to the privatization scheme, and a complete list of workers affected, their job titles, work locations and seniority as it would apply to any potential layoffs.

We held worksite informational meetings as scheduled throughout the state to inform concerned workers about layoff processes and bumping rights and to gather updated personal contact information to better keep potential affected workers informed.

On Feb. 12, management provided us a list containing all ASPIRE employees' names, positions and locations of employment. This does not mean that all on the list will be affected. Those positions have not yet been identified by management.

Earlier, management sent us the same generic letter it distributed Jan. 15 to ASPIRE workers when it announced its scheme. We received it after the workers received it that day. According to the letter, privatizing operations of the ASPIRE program "means that some roles within the existing program will change dramatically and other positions will be eliminated."

As the Stater was going to press Feb. 18, none of our bargaining unit workers in the ASPIRE program has received an official layoff notice.

Management's request for proposals to privatize the ASPIRE can be read here:
www.mseaseiu.org/forms/2016ASPIRErfp.pdf

According to the request for proposals, any proposals are due by 2 p.m. March 29 at which point they will be opened. It states any chosen contractor would begin operating the ASPIRE program July 1, 2016.

We attended the bidder's conference Jan. 29 as part of our information-gathering process. Two potential bidders participated in the conference: Maximus Inc. and FedCap. See the related story on Page 4 for more information about Maximus.

We are obviously concerned about any workers whose jobs are being targeted for elimination. We are determined to ensure the contractual rights of every bargaining unit member are respected. In the event of layoffs, we will do everything within our power to ensure that anyone displaced can find comparable work at comparable pay with the least possible amount of disruption to their lives.

We want to answer everyone's questions surrounding layoff procedures and bumping rights. Please be sure to familiarize yourself with your contractual rights in your State of Maine Executive Branch contracts as they relate to seniority, layoffs and bumping. The contracts are on our website at www.mseaseiu.org via the "contracts" link.

We also want to make sure anyone who receives state services can get back on their feet. Our members have a proven record of providing services and respecting the confidentiality of the Maine people they help in the ASPIRE program. We don't see how handing this work over to for-profit companies, potentially from out of state, is in the best interest of the Maine people who pay for and use these services.

State Rep. Drew Gattine, House chair of the Legislature's Health and Human Services Committee, agrees with us. He also praised the work done by the ASPIRE workers.

"The current program, when you compare it to other states, is working remarkably well. We have the second highest rate of work participation in the country among all the states," Rep. Gattine told WZON The Pulse radio host Don Cookson. "I've met with a number of the workers and their supervisors. The reason that they're able to be successful is because they're local. I've talked to these workers and they know the families. They know the situation. They know what the pathway is to help these folks become self-sustaining and get on the program. They have ideas to make the program better."

"I mean, there's so much benefit to keeping this program localized and letting people who are already doing a good job continue to do their work and then just finding ways to make it better."