

April 3, 2025

Testimony in support of LD 943, An Act to Require the ASPIRE-TANF Program to be Administered by State Employees

Members of the Health and Human Services Committee,

I stand before you today to advocate for defunding the Fedcap contract. Fedcap has regrettably failed to meet its deliverables and mission. As stewards of public funds, it is our responsibility to ensure that these funds are allocated to programs and organizations that effectively serve our communities and deliver on their promises. Unfortunately, Fedcap has demonstrated a persistent inability to do so. DHHS demonstrated over the many years it managed the ASPIRE program that it has the capacity, infrastructure, and commitment to operating the program far more effectively than the out of state, private Fedcap.

You will hear testimony from many participants who have had troubling experiences with Fedcap, and the concerns of participants have been well documented over the years. I am here to share with you the concerns I have for the Fedcap employees. Fedcap has a toxic and hostile work environment that results in significant stress and anxiety for the employees.

I am a licensed clinical social worker who has worked in the social work field, for multiple non-profits, for over 30 years. I was excited about the Fedcap mission of providing education, workforce development, and economic opportunities to underserved populations. When I was hired in August of 2024 as the Performance Manager for the Sanford office, I thought I would be continuing my work with and for the most vulnerable people and families in our State. However, I soon learned that Fedcap consistently underperforms in its mission and mismanages the resources provided by the State to meet that mission.

Within the first few weeks of working at Fedcap, I realized that working at Fedcap was like catching a falling knife. Not only were participants being woefully underserved, but the staff was being drastically overworked. Something was going on that was not right.

I am going to focus on three areas of such great concern that I am convinced that we need to defund the Fedcap contract and move the ASPIRE program back under the auspices of DHHS. The first is the unnecessary and fiscally irresponsible duplication of services and resources required by having a separate, private agency manage the ASPIRE program. The second is the lack of professionalism of the Fedcap senior leadership team and their complete lack of care, concern and respect for the Fedcap staff. The third is the glaring evidence that Fedcap is not meeting the deliverables of its contract and the pledge inherent in the TANF program to support participants to become meaningfully employed and economically stable. The examples below are in no way an exhaustive list, but I hope will highlight my concerns.

Duplication of services and resources:

- 1) I few weeks into my tenure, I was speaking about the excellent training provided by the DHHS Regional Planner to me and my staff. I was told by senior leadership that I didn't need to attend those trainings and staff should remember "who they work for". Several additional exchanges over the next few months demonstrated an attitude and approach that as Fedcap employees, we were not supposed to work closely with the DHHS staff, that we were not on the same team, and we are not in a partnership. My staff and I always felt that we got the most reliable information, training, guidance and direction from the DHHS office and staff and we were appreciative. It felt like, from the Fedcap point of view, we were in "enemy territory" when we reached out to DHHS for support and guidance.

- 2) There is significant duplication of services and monitoring of program outcomes. The communication between Fedcap and DHHS, to serve the same population, is cumbersome and slow, and would be eliminated if ASPIRE participants were served by DHHS staff.
- 3) Fedcap keeps a spreadsheet of all participant cases that are involved with Maine Equal Justice Partners (MEJP). These cases are reviewed and treated distinctly; the case is often assigned to the Performance Manager for special attention. The full staff received a Workvivo message that no one should directly speak with, email or respond to any MEJP communication and that we had to send all MEJP communications to President Serena Powell and Vice-President Shannon Emery.
- 4) I am not sure how many of you know that Fedcap has a plan to overhaul the Opportunity Centers to create an open space concept. Many staff were very concerned about the impact of this on their obligation for confidentiality and they were worried it would have a negative impact on their work. (This is typical for Fedcap. They would consistently make major changes that had a significant impact on the employees without ever consulting with those who would be implementing the changes.) These renovations will cost tens of thousands of dollars, to be expended on rented office spaces, requiring all new furniture, equipment and technology. This seems to be misuse of the TANF funds that should be directed towards participant outcomes, especially now when the program is underachieving on its stated goals and purpose.
- 5) While senior management was willing to spend an unspecified amount of money on office renovations, I requested a \$10 Staples calculator for a Career Advisor so she could calculate the correct amount of mileage to request for her participants to get to work and school. My supervisor denied the purchase of the calculator. I bought one myself and gave it to my employee.
- 6) Fedcap insists on the use of the Zoom Workvivo platform for all communication between staff. We are strongly discouraged from using email. I frequently received no replies to my emails sent to senior leadership. This is deeply troubling because it is extremely difficult to follow and track communications on the Workvivo platform. When I left Fedcap, I was responsible for following and tracking over 77 channels. Email provides a traceable, monitorable communication exchange.

Toxic employee relations and culture:

- 1) In my short tenure, I brought up several safety issues that were totally dismissed by management. I took the responsibility of supervising staff seriously. I believe that it is only by treating your staff well and supporting their professional growth that you can serve participants well. Early on, on a day when our office was open, but closed to participants, I learned that our main front office door had a lock that could not be opened, when locked, from the inside without a key. This is a serious hazard in the event of fire or other emergencies that require quick evacuation from the building. I immediately brought it to the attention of my supervisor. I then also located a local locksmith that would have been able to supply and put in the appropriate type of lock for a total of \$160. I escalated this issue multiples times, I provided the estimate and the contact information for the locksmith, yet leadership never approved the lock replacement. When I went back to the office weeks after my resignation, the lock was still not replaced.
- 2) When I brought up the need for safety planning for our staff, so they would feel prepared to handle and de-escalate participants who were impaired or had become dysregulated, I was told by the vice-president that safety planning was unnecessary. I believe we are all aware of the high level of stress caused by living in the crisis of poverty. Any one of us can become elevated and dysregulated and staff

need to feel they have the training and support to know what to do in these circumstances. The training was never provided in my time there.

- 3) I insisted that if my staff were in the office alone, they would keep the front door locked. A Career Advisor who was in the building alone, in her office located at the end of a long hallway, had locked the door, per my instructions. When this was discovered by my supervisor, she was reprimanded for having the door locked and told to keep it unlocked. This is a management problem. No staff should have to be alone in the office, with their safety jeopardized. Fedcap has been consistently understaffed, and the burden always falls on the existing workers.
- 4) Staff are not paid a livable wage. The Participant Success Advisors, who recently have been tasked with more and more responsibilities, always cover the Help Center, require excellent communication skills and attention to detail, are paid \$20.65/hour. They make more at Five Guys.
- 5) The benefits that Fedcap offers are completely unaffordable. Four of my staff of five elected to have no benefits because they could not afford the plans being offered by Fedcap. Employees are only offered plans by Empire BCBS, a New York based company. I don't need to tell any of you that Maine wages and New York City wages are not the same. Twice a month, more money went to Empire BCBS than went into my bank account. Typically, when I brought this up with my supervisor, the gaslighting was intense. I was told that I "was the first person to ever complain." I soon learned, from the benefits office in New York City, that everyone had complained, but "there was nothing they could do to change it."
- 6) There were no supervision templates when I arrived. I suggested that a supervision template was important in our efforts to standardize training and services, yet one was never provided.
- 7) One Career Advisor I supervised told me she had not had coaching during the entire 1 ½ years she had been employed by Fedcap.
- 8) I was told to ask my new employees based in Sanford to travel to Houlton or Skowhegan to get the training they needed. This would have been 5.5 to 8.5 hours of driving per day respectively.
- 9) The Biddeford office had a collection of clothing and essential children's winter gear for participants who came into the office. When the office was visited by the Fedcap VP, she told the staff that it looked "messy" and directed them to pack up all of the clothing and gear and take it to Goodwill. The clothing closet was also eliminated from the South Portland office.
- 10) I was personally bullied and treated with profound disrespect on multiple occasions. I was micromanaged, my decisions were undermined, I was directed to take actions that I viewed as unethical, senior leadership interviewed my staff three times when I was absent, creating extreme anxiety for them about the stability of our office and their jobs.
- 11) I have PTSD from working at Fedcap and I still have nightmares. I know I am not the only one. Three minutes is not enough time to relay them all here, but I am happy to have a detailed conversation with any lawmaker that reaches out to me. My contact information is below.

Inability to meet deliverables:

In addition to failing to meet deliverables, Fedcap's operations have increasingly drifted away from its core mission. The focus appears to have shifted from empowering individuals to achieve economic independence to merely fulfilling contractual obligations and securing continued funding. I saw this demonstrated daily:

- 1) In the three months I spent in our Sanford office, only two participants used the Networking Center. Exactly two out of 200+ participants. We did not have a single participant complete a Power of

Possibility course. Our Sanford office rarely had participants engaged in educational or work related activities. A majority of the participants participated in orientations and appointments remotely, so had no connection with program staff.

- 2) At the time I resigned in December 2024, each Career Advisor across the state was required to carry 90+ cases to comply with the requirement for participants to have two in-person appointments per month. Many participants were assigned to Career Advisors that were based in faraway counties where in person meetings were impossible. On one day in December, I counted 26 staff out of office, a significant portion of the total. The staff remaining were getting scheduled double and triple appointments in the same hour. My understanding is that there is a 70% staff turnover rate.
- 3) There was no rational, thoughtful or effective plan for assigning the dozens of appointments that were on "overflow" due to being chronically understaffed and the high absence rate of existing staff. It was total chaos daily and very stressful for the staff that had shown up to do the work.
- 4) The Work Participation Rate (WPR) was abysmally low for all staff at all offices due to no fault of their own. This is the most critical federal TANF requirement. Fedcap has not met the expected WPR as a program since it took over the operation of ASPIRE. From my vantage point, Fedcap shows no sign of increasing its capacity to meet this important requirement.
- 5) The Placement Specialist that I met once in the Sanford office resigned shortly after I arrived. I say this because promoting partnerships with employers and placement in employment is the primary function of Fedcap. I was never notified that a new Placement Specialist had been assigned. When I reached out to see who was fulfilling the important responsibilities of the placement specialist in our community, I was given the name of the Placement Specialist in Portland. When I reached out to see if he could come visit our office and meet our new staff, he told me he could not. He was not allowed to travel without specific permission. I was eventually able to get approval for him to come to our office once, but no one was providing the placement services for our participants on an ongoing basis.
- 6) There is one person, one, for the entire state of Maine, who is responsible for providing support and guidance to any and all participants who are interested in self-employment, or to help and train the Career Advisors to work with their participants who are interested in self-employment.
- 7) Career Advisors are regularly and emphatically told by senior leadership that they are not case managers even though DHHS contracts for case management. The disconnect between what DHHS expects and the directives that Fedcap provides to its employees creates role confusion and distress.

In my last Performance Manager meeting, we were told that the Fedcap president had given the directive that there were to be no mismatched chairs in our meeting rooms. All the empty chairs had to match.

This is what is called rearranging the deck chairs on the Titanic.

Continuing to allocate public funds to an underperforming and mismanaged organization is a disservice to our TANF recipients. It is our duty to ensure that every dollar spent contributes to meaningful and measurable outcomes, and unfortunately, Fedcap has proven incapable of delivering on this promise.

Respectfully submitted,

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