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Maine Equal Justice

People Policy Solutions

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MEJ Testimony in *Support* of LDs 453, An Act to Require the State to Pay 90 Percent of All General Assistance Expenses of Municipalities and Indian Tribes; 657, An Act to Modify the Law Governing Municipal General Assistance by Designating Broadband Internet Access Service and Wireless Access Point Technology as Basic Necessities; 1017, An Act to Include Food Provided or Served at Emergency Shelters in General Assistance Reimbursement; and 1029, An Act to Ensure General Assistance for Housing Does Not Reduce Assistance for Other Basic Necessities and to Increase Presumptive Eligibility and State Reimbursement for General Assistance;

MEJ Testimony *Neither for nor Against* LDs 637, Resolve, Directing the Department of Health and Human Services to Evaluate the Municipal General Assistance Program Database; and 1081, An Act to Support Access to General Assistance at Municipal General Assistance Offices and Designated Places

MEJ Testimony *Opposing* LDs 1046, An Act to Establish a 180-day State Residency Requirement for Receiving Municipal General Assistance; 1066, An Act Regarding Limits on Municipal General Assistance; and 1274, An Act to Cap State General Assistance Reimbursement to Municipalities

April 7, 2025

Good morning, Senator Ingwerson, Representative Meyer and members of the Health and Human Services Committee. My name is Dina Malual, I use she/her pronouns, and I am a Policy Advocate with Maine Equal Justice (MEJ), a nonprofit legal aid provider working to increase economic security, opportunity, and equity for people in Maine. We are pleased to testify in *support* of LDs 453, 657, 1017, and 1029. We are also testifying *neither for nor against* LDs 637 and 1081, and in *opposition* to LDs 1046, 1066, and 1274.

Maine Equal Justice has worked on General Assistance since we were founded in the mid-90s, and some of our staff have worked on it for more than 40 years. In our legal services work, our engagement with low-income Mainers around public policies, and our advocacy work at the State House, with DHHS, and with municipalities, we've seen how General Assistance (GA) is an essential part of our safety net for Mainers in every region of our state, and we also have a great deal of experience with aspects of the program that need to be improved.

Support

Maine Equal Justice is supportive of LD 657 and urges the committee to pass this bill with a friendly language amendment. In 2025, it is almost impossible to get around the world without the internet. From paying bills to taking classes online to securing employment, the internet is

part of our daily lives; it has become a basic necessity. For this reason, we urge you to pass LD 657 - though we suggest an amendment to further improve access.

Just like the internet, we cannot get by without a phone. We suggest removing language in Sec. 1. 22 MRSA §4301, sub-§1, as amended by PL 2019, c. 126, §2, (line 6 of the bill):

1. "Basic necessities" means food, potable water, clothing, shelter, fuel, electricity, nonelective medical services as recommended by a physician, nonprescription drugs, telephone ~~where when it is necessary for medical reasons~~, broadband Internet access service, wireless access point technology and any other commodity or service determined essential by the overseer in accordance with the municipality's ordinance and this chapter."

It is impossible to get by without a phone. Limiting the definition to just medical emergencies is unrealistic. People use their phones to schedule appointments *in addition* to viewing their work schedule, coordinating after school activities with their children, communicating with teachers, etc. Removing the conditional language around cell phone usage makes it so people can maintain their service for the foreseeable future.

LD 1029, An Act to Ensure General Assistance for Housing Does Not Reduce Assistance for Other Basic Necessities and to Increase Presumptive Eligibility and State Reimbursement for General Assistance

As housing instability rises, we are grateful for legislation that seeks to improve programs that support low income people. LD 1029 increases the GA eligibility period for emergency shelter stay from 30 days to 180 days, increases the municipality reimbursement rate from 70% to 90% and would ensure that housing support via GA wouldn't reduce assistance for other basic needs.

LD 1029 captures the big picture: low income people are spending more for rent and utilities and cannot afford other basic necessities. This bill ensures that people who are receiving housing support via GA are able to meet the costs of basic needs in addition to housing. It also provides a safety net where people can build some security as they continue to work towards financial independence.

In addition to ensuring individuals receiving GA meet *all* their basic needs, LD 1029 supports municipalities by increasing the reimbursement rate and extending presumptive eligibility from 30 days to 180 days.

The reimbursement increase incentivizes towns to help more people. We've heard time and time again that people are traveling all over the state in search of support via GA. If passed, people

won't have to travel far and can remain in their hometowns close to their place of employment, home, family and friends.

LD 1029 also addresses the housing crisis and covers some of the costs of shelter beds by extending presumptive eligibility.

Similarly, we support LD 453 because of the increased reimbursement rate - though we believe the additional proposals in LD 1029 make it a stronger bill.

We recognize that there has been much discussion about the costs of the General Assistance program this year and last legislative session. We think it is important to remember that **the baseline funding for GA has not been increased in many years even though the costs of every basic need it supports - especially housing - have increased significantly over the past five years. Inflation and soaring housing, heating, and food costs are not the fault of people with low incomes.** The people in all of our communities who can't afford their rent, basic nutrition, medicine, heat, transportation, and electricity shouldn't be punished by restricting GA. Instead, we must invest adequately in this program and others that help people meet their most basic needs.

We also support LD 1017. Shelters are struggling to provide adequate services to those who are unhoused. Often this includes providing food. Since those individuals being served by shelters are eligible for GA, the shelters should be reimbursed for all the services they provide. In addition to covering food, we also suggest strengthening this bill by including any basic need provided by a shelter that would otherwise be covered by GA. For example, if a shelter provides transportation or bus vouchers for individuals to get to work or other necessary appointments, those costs should be eligible for reimbursement.

Neither For Nor Against

Last year, with leadership from this committee, the legislature passed LD 1732, which took several steps to improve the GA program, including the creation of a database by DHHS. Our understanding is that this database is in process and will be available to municipalities in a few months. For this reason, we do not believe LD 637 is necessary.

Another improvement in LD 1732 was requiring municipalities to accept GA applications during normal business hours. LD 1081 seeks to amend the daily hours of when an applicant can apply for General Assistance. Maine Equal Justice has often heard of the challenges individuals experience when municipalities have extremely limited hours to accept GA applications. However, we also understand that staffing can be a challenge and see this bill as attempting to strike a balance between those two concerns. We do want to make clear that municipalities must accept applications for GA for those experiencing an emergency at any time.

Oppose

We are disappointed to see legislation that would create barriers for GA and urge the committee to stand with their colleagues in the 131st Legislature who voted against similar proposals. The program is a vital safety net for Mainers in crisis and LDs 1046, 1066 and 1274 would increase hardship for those already struggling the most.

LD 1046, limits GA access to those who have been a resident of Maine for 180 days or more. This bill seems targeted at immigrants who have recently made Maine their home and it would also harm others who are seeking to start a new life in our state. GA is only available to individuals and families who are residing in Maine and to people who are considered lawfully present in the United States. Maine needs people to move here for our economic future, and new people bring new ideas and skills that create vibrant communities across our state. Investing in people when they first arrive pays off in the long run as those individuals and their families enter the workforce and strengthen the economy of our state.

LD 1066, An Act Regarding Limits on Municipal General Assistance proposes changes that will result in more people becoming unhoused. The current proposal to limit municipalities from exceeding the maximum levels of assistance past 30 days in a 12-month period for any household fails to consider the challenges low-income people face. The attempt to rollback support for low income families is especially disappointing because we are currently experiencing a housing crisis and the costs of other basic needs continue to rise. We should be doing all we can to maintain housing for Mainers during this turbulent time. This proposal undermines the stability housing provides and also makes it harder for municipalities to respond to higher costs for other needs - like heating. If this bill passes, we **will** see more people become unhoused.

LD 1274, An Act to Cap State General Assistance Reimbursement to Municipalities aims to limit reimbursement to certain municipalities for General Assistance if they exceed 50% of the funds reimbursed to municipalities for GA in a fiscal year. This change seems targeted at Portland and other municipalities that appropriately administer the program. While we recognize that the cost of GA has increased in the last few years, we must also acknowledge that the cost of living has also increased. As we said earlier, the baseline for General Assistance hasn't increased in many years, so it's unfair to restrict access to a program that has failed to adequately address the ever-changing needs of people with low incomes. The issue isn't that more people are relying on GA or that Portland, Bangor, and some other municipalities help more people. The fact is that some municipalities do not properly administer the program, which pushes people to flee to other municipalities for support. This bill hurts the municipalities that are administering the program appropriately and incentives towns that are not following the law.

Conclusion

Rather than creating limitations and restrictions to GA to alleviate program pressure and costs, there needs to be affordable, accessible housing supports. We should be doing all we can to reduce the number of evictions and homelessness, not increase them. We would be happy to continue to work with you and your colleagues in other committees to create policy solutions that don't harm people with low incomes.

Thank you for the opportunity to comment. Again we urge you to vote in support of LDs 453, 657 (with an amendment), 1017, and 1029. And we urge you to vote against LDs 1046, 1066 and 1274. I'm happy to answer any questions and can be available for any work sessions.