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April 7, 2025

**Testimony of Representative Melanie Sachs introducing  
*LD 1081, An Act to Support Access to General Assistance at Municipal General Assistance  
Offices and Designated Places*  
Before the Joint Standing Committee on Health and Human Services**

Senator Ingwersen, Representative Meyer and esteemed members of the Joint Standing Committee on Health and Human Services, my name is Melanie Sachs and I am honored to represent the community of Freeport in the Maine Legislature.

I am before you today to introduce *LD 1081, An Act to Support Access to General Assistance at Municipal General Assistance Offices and Designated Places*.

I am grateful to this committee for your diligence and hard work in past sessions, reviewing the General Assistance (GA) program in Maine, and now this session, including the many bills before you today. As a social worker for almost three decades, I am deeply aware of the impact and important role that GA plays in supporting vulnerable people here in Maine and in my community.

One of the significant pieces of GA legislation passed last session (in the 131<sup>st</sup>) was LD 1732, sponsored by Chair Meyer. The bill was the result of many hours of conversations with stakeholders and the department, and made essential updates and reforms to the program. Among its provisions, LD 1732 required DHHS to provide training in the program provisions and administration, as well as training on trauma-informed services and culturally and linguistically appropriate services to program administrators. Municipalities were charged to make sure staff were trained and that they deliver informed services to all applicants. It also required DHHS to provide an Internet-based, real-time database containing the information necessary to properly determine an applicant's eligibility. The legislation established a data-reporting schedule by DHHS to the Legislature. It also clarified municipal responsibilities for applicants or recipients who move between municipalities, including extending the timeline for support from thirty days to six months in some instances.

As noted by my town manager in a recent conversation, Freeport embraced these changes as thoughtful and necessary to improve the program.

My community has a long history of working with GA recipients and applicants in what I believe is a model program. Our long-time and beloved GA administrator, Johanna Hanselman, retired in the fall of 2021 after decades in the role. As described in a local newsletter, “Caring for the well-being of town residents in need was of the utmost importance to [her... [she] expressed how important each client was to her and the value she found in listening to their challenging stories and restoring hope.”

Given that, it is an important service that merited thoughtful planning during its transition. The town council voted to contract with our local social service agency, Freeport Community Services (FCS) to run that program because, as an FCS program manager noted at the time, it “dovetailed beautifully into the services and support that FCS has long offered to residents of Freeport...to ensure they can access appropriate and immediate financial assistance in conjunction with in-house and outside community referrals.” A one stop shop, if you will. Having worked closely with and for the town as both a former council Chair and as a former Executive Director of Freeport Community Services many years ago, I am deeply familiar with and can attest to the care and support our community has for those who are vulnerable and the essential role GA administration has played in that support.

I paint that picture to say that for all of our documented respect for the program and its recipients, I am here today to discuss the one piece of LD 1732 that Freeport has struggled to comply with, due to what is now a familiar refrain in many sectors — workforce shortages.

Before LD 1732, the law required that every municipality have a “local office” — a general assistance office or designated place where any person may apply for general assistance at regular, reasonable times designated by the municipal officers. As noted in testimony during that hearing, this led to varying degrees of access. For one community, this might be one day per week, for two hours. In another community, it could be five days per week for an hour a day. Alternatively, it could be four days a week for 10 hours per day for yet another.

LD 1732, in an attempt to address this variability, changed the statute to read, “There must be in each municipality a general assistance office or designated place where any person may apply for general assistance during the municipality's regular business hours.” As written, this means that a municipality must have a staff member available to accept and process applications at every moment the municipality is open to the public.

Freeport has struggled to comply with this requirement, despite its best efforts.

Freeport Community Services terminated its contract with the Town of Freeport to administer the program in June 2024, with 90 days’ notice, citing “increased applications and a lack of capacity,” combined with increased case complexity. They noted that their employee was spending an average of 50 hours per week on one case, and efforts to find a part-time employee to help with the role were not successful. The town began to readminister the program in September 2024. We were fortunate that our newly hired town manager, Sophie Wilson, had previous experience administering the program, so there was no interruption in service, but we were hopeful to find a successful applicant.

Unfortunately, now in April 2025 despite numerous postings and creativity, Freeport, like many municipalities, is struggling to fill this position. Our town manager, with support from our town clerks, has continued to fulfill the role as the primary administrator, despite the many competing needs of her position. The law requires that she must be available to accept and process an application Monday-Thursday, from 7 am to 6 pm, and have a written decision for the completed application processed within 24 hours. As you know, these applications, as FCS staff indicated, have become increasingly complex. Freeport is a community of 9,000+ people, and one can only imagine the array of issues facing a town manager of a municipality this size. Multiply this situation by the hundreds of other communities in Maine who are facing not only workforce shortages, but also may have just a few employees total, serving multiple roles already and who are now trying to comply with this sea change in regulation around hours and access.

In discussing this issue with staff from the Maine Municipal Association (MMA), they confirmed that this shift requiring availability at all hours at all times was one that other communities were struggling with as well, due to workforce shortages and capacity issues. I also had several conversations with an advocacy organization who had urged the changes in hours in LD 1732 prior to submitting this bill, who had rightfully raised the issue of limited or variable access in the previous session. I worked on language with feedback and input from both organizations, acknowledging that I had no desire to make it harder for applicants to access the service but want to make sure communities could actually provide the service.

The result is the proposal before you, which tweaks the current language in an attempt to address this reality:

- It retains the provision that a person can obtain an application at any time that a municipal office is open and requires them to post those hours.
- It modifies the statute to require that a municipality may designate daily hours when an application for general assistance will be accepted and processed, and that those hours cannot be LESS than 50% of the municipality's regular business hours. Thus if the office is open from 7 am-6 pm, Monday-Thursday, then they must accept applications for 5.5 hours each day. These must be posted in a prominent location as well.
- It retains all of the other current statutory provisions for the posted notice, including the name of the overseer available to take applications in an emergency at all other times, the fact that the municipality must issue a written decision on all applications within 24 hours and the department's toll-free telephone number for reporting alleged violations in accordance with section 4321.

These are modest changes to reflect the current reality of communities who truly do want to provide excellent service, comply with the law and support those in need. Thank you for your consideration of LD 1081.