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## Maine Equal Justice

**People Policy Solutions**

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### **Testimony on behalf of Maine Equal Justice in support of LD 1406, An Act to Amend Certain Definitions in the Child and Family Services and Child Protection Act**

April 8, 2025

Good afternoon Senator Ingwersen, Representative Meyer, and Members of the Committee on Health and Human Services. My name is Ann Danforth and I use she/her pronouns. I'm a Senior Policy Advocate at Maine Equal Justice (MEJ), a nonprofit civil legal aid provider working to increase economic security, opportunity, and equity for people in Maine.

**I'm here today to testify in support of LD 1406.**

I'm usually in this committee testifying on issues that relate to Maine's TANF/ASPIRE program. As this committee knows, TANF/ASPIRE is a key economic support for families with children, enabling them to make ends meet. It also provides parents with the opportunity to pursue education and training that can help lift families out of poverty, and at the same time, strengthen our state's workforce. MEJ's work on TANF/ASPIRE and other issues is always informed by and done in collaboration with our Equal Justice Partners Circle members who have lived experience with poverty.

Through MEJ's work on anti-poverty programs and through decades of research on the topic<sup>1</sup>, we know that we can prevent many families' involvement in the child welfare system by providing concrete supports like cash assistance, child care, and health care; and access to supportive services to address mental health needs, substance use disorder, and domestic violence and abuse.

We also know that right now, far too many families are caught up in our state's child welfare system due to allegations of "neglect," when all they need is financial support and connections to supportive resources. The way our current statute is written, there is

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.chapinhall.org/wp-content/uploads/Economic-Supports-deck.pdf>

nothing that distinguishes between someone struggling and striving to meet their basic needs and the *intentional* withholding of resources. By changing Maine's statute in the way LD 1406 proposes, we can help families by recognizing their humanity and helping them get what they need to provide for their families. This change will also help hold us accountable as a state, as it will ensure we are first providing needed resources to families before involving them in a life-altering system. These changes would reduce trauma for families and kids, improve long-term outcomes for families and kids, as well as reduce the burden on the state's welfare system and save our state money in the long-term.

Lastly, this legislation is in line with DHHS and MCWAN's own report<sup>2</sup> which names defining neglect vs. poverty as a key opportunity to improve mandated reporting and community support for families in Maine:

- *In 2024, the Biden-Harris administration issued guidance to states to differentiate between neglect and poverty in statutes.*
- *27 states exempt financial inability to provide for a child.*
- *Example: Kentucky (SB 8) narrows definition of neglect to situations where a child's welfare is harmed or threatened with harm by a parent due to inadequate care, supervision, food, clothing, shelter, education or medical care necessary for the child's well-being when financially able to do so or offered financial or other means to do so.*

Thank you for your time. I'm happy to answer any questions you may have and can be available for the work session.

Ann Danforth