



Maine Equal Justice
People Policy Solutions

126 Sewall Street
Augusta, Maine 04330-6822
TTY/Voice: (207) 626-7058
www.maineequaljustice.org

Kathy Kilrain del Rio
Advocacy & Programs Director
(207) 626-7058, ext. 210
kathy@mejp.org

MEJ Testimony *in opposition* to LD 1367, Resolve, to Study Methods of Gradually Transitioning Individuals from Government Assistance Programs to the Workforce

April 14, 2025

Good afternoon, Senator Ingwerson, Representative Meyer, and members of the Health and Human Services Committee. My name is Kathy Kilrain del Rio, I use she/her pronouns, and I'm the Advocacy and Programs Director for Maine Equal Justice, a nonprofit legal aid provider working to increase economic security, opportunity, and equity for people in Maine. MEJ has worked for decades on policies related to public benefit programs, unemployment insurance, education, and training. We also provide direct legal aid to people with low-incomes struggling to meet their basic needs, navigate evictions, and move from poverty to financial security through education and work.

We all share the goal that Mainers can meet their basic needs by having a safe place to call home, food on their tables, access to health care, the ability to travel to and from work, school, and necessary appointments, and enough money to pay for utilities and heat. Most of us are able to meet those needs through paid work. Yet, for others, even those who are doing their best to make ends meet, additional supports are needed. There are programs intended to provide those supports depending on the different circumstances of individuals and families – programs like MaineCare (Medicaid), the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF), General Assistance (GA), child care subsidy, Supplemental Security Income (SSI), Social Security Disability Insurance (SSDI), and housing supports like the Housing Choice Voucher Program (Section 8). While there can be overlap between these supports, they have a variety of eligibility criteria and renewal rules, and are meant to support different populations to meet their specific needs.

Navigating these programs and figuring out what income and other supports are needed for each individual and family to transition off is very complicated. While there can be changes, the basic tenets of most of these programs are determined by federal laws and rules. This can make it difficult to address the benefits cliff at the state level. However, Maine has taken positive steps to reduce the cliff effect in recent years.¹ These include:

- expanding MaineCare eligibility for children, which reduces health care costs for families as incomes increase.
- removing the asset limit for SNAP and the Medicare Savings Program (MSP), and increasing the asset limit for TANF. The ability to save for emergencies is critical for

¹ <https://www.ncsl.org/human-services/introduction-to-benefits-cliffs-and-public-assistance-programs>

financial security.² When families cannot save, an unexpected emergency – such as a significant car or home repair – can result in an inability to work, go to school, or maintain housing. This type of emergency can lead to a spiral of financial challenges.

- programs to limit child care costs.
- changes to the TANF program that allow a participant's earned income to be disregarded in a series of steps over six months of new employment.
- strengthening transitional support programs like transitional food and health care assistance.
- expanding opportunities for TANF recipients to pursue higher education through the creation of the Parents as Scholars (PaS) and Higher Opportunities for Pathways to Employment (HOPE) programs

Maine has taken other steps to support people with lower incomes. For example, by creating the Office of the Health Insurance Marketplace, we are better able to determine when special enrollment periods may be needed and can do more targeted outreach to people who may be transitioning off of MaineCare. In recognition that improved, refundable tax credits can provide income that supports the needs of low-income families, Maine increased and improved access to the Maine Dependent Exemption Tax Credit (our version of the Child Tax Credit (CTC)) and the Earned Income Tax Credit (EITC). The legislature is considering further improvements to the Maine Dependent Tax Credit this session. The creation of the Eviction Prevention Program pilot last legislative session provides another safeguard for those who are housed but who are experiencing temporary challenges in paying rent that could lead to an eviction. The legislature is considering a bill to extend this program and make improvements based on lessons learned so far.

It's also important to remember that supports like SNAP, MaineCare, and housing vouchers are work supports. When people are able to get food, access health care and fill prescriptions, and maintain a safe place to live, they are better able to go to work or school.^{3,4} Access to education and training is a critical piece of the puzzle in addressing the benefits cliff because individuals and families are most at risk of the cliff when their wages are inadequate to maintain housing, pay for transportation costs, get food, or pay for health care costs. If we push people into jobs with inadequate wages and benefits, or into jobs without a path for advancement, they will be most harmed by the benefits cliff. We should focus instead on improving people's access to these critical supports and making sure people have the education and training they need and desire to find good paying jobs and careers that will enable them to support themselves and their families.

Right now there are policies being proposed at the federal level that would have significant harmful impacts on programs like Medicaid and SNAP. If we are concerned about the benefits cliff, we should be working together to help our Congressional delegation and the executive branch understand the harm that will come from those proposed changes, and we should be making contingency plans at the state level to address the harm if those policy changes occur.

²

https://files.consumerfinance.gov/f/documents/cfpb_mem_emergency-savings-financial-security_report_2022-3.pdf

³ <https://www.kff.org/medicaid/issue-brief/5-key-facts-about-medicaid-work-requirements/>

⁴

<https://www.cbpp.org/research/food-assistance/snap-provides-critical-benefits-to-workers-and-their-families>

It's also important to remember that nationally, nearly two thirds of non-elderly adults with Medicaid work; and 86% of SNAP households with working-age adults who are not receiving disability benefits also work.⁵ TANF has a mandatory work participation program called ASPIRE. Those who don't work are mostly caring for family, dealing with health issues or a disability, or going to school.⁶

Finally, because of the likelihood that there will be policy changes instituted by the federal government in multiple support programs, this is a difficult time to direct DHHS to study this issue and produce a report. It will be difficult to anticipate what changes could be made and how those will affect state flexibilities and steps we've taken to address the benefits cliff already. It's also difficult to anticipate the economic impacts of federal policies on industries in our state – and how those impacts will impact access to work or require changing education and training needs. Policy shifts at the federal level will also put further pressure on DHHS staff to respond to those changes while also dealing with the loss of some employees due to federal funding cuts. This bill would require additional work that the Department likely does not have capacity for at this time.

For these reasons, we do not believe this bill should move forward at this time, If in the future – once we have a better understanding of federal policy changes and shifts in our economy – you'd like to move forward with a study, we urge you to create a task force, working group, or commission with representation from a range of stakeholders, including those who are utilizing public benefit programs, have used them in the past and transitioned off, and advocates and direct service providers with expertise around these policies. We also urge you to ensure that those who would participate in such a study due to their lived experience be compensated for their time and costs associated with participating.

Again, we ask that you vote Ought Not to Pass on LD 1367. Thank you for the opportunity to testify today. I'm happy to answer any of your questions and can be available for the work session.

5

[https://www.cbpp.org/blog/taking-away-peoples-health-coverage-and-food-assistance-will-increase-hardship-not-employment#:~:text=Nearly%20%20in%20%20non,attending%20school%20\(see%20chart\)](https://www.cbpp.org/blog/taking-away-peoples-health-coverage-and-food-assistance-will-increase-hardship-not-employment#:~:text=Nearly%20%20in%20%20non,attending%20school%20(see%20chart))

⁶ Ibid.