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People Policy Solutions

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MEJ Testimony in *Support* of LD 978, An Act to Increase General Assistance Reimbursement for Municipalities and Indian Tribes

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Good afternoon, Senator Ingwersen, Representative Meyer and members of the Health and Human Services Committee. My name is Dina Malual 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 LD 978.

Maine Equal Justice (MEJ) 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 have seen how General Assistance (GA) is an essential part of our safety net for Mainers in every region of our state.

MEJ is supportive of LD 978 and previous GA bills that increase the reimbursement rate, specifically LD 1029, as it would increase the presumptive eligibility period, thus allowing shelters to effectively bill GA for emergency shelter overnights.

We are supportive of LDs 978 and 1029 and believe that the two together could positively transform GA. MEJ continues to support the reimbursement increase from 70% to 90% because this increase could provide uniformity in the program across the state. As we mentioned in previous testimony, a 90% reimbursement allows people to remain in their hometowns close to their place of employment, home, family and friends because it will help towns that do not have strong GA budgets to provide needed assistance. We hope this would also result in fewer individuals and families moving to service areas to access GA. As we have discussed before, there can be other reasons why people may choose to move to service areas, but we know that an inability to access GA in their municipality can be one reason.

While supportive of this bill, we have concerns about delaying the increase to municipalities that are currently providing the largest amount of GA to people in need. We understand the desire to find a different approach to getting to 90% reimbursement, but we cannot ignore the fact that

certain towns are incurring the highest costs because they are following the law and serving anyone who is eligible. People are moving to these municipalities because they are getting the support they need and it is unfortunate that those same municipalities would continue to bear the greatest costs of providing services for a longer period of time.

We would be happy to discuss ways that both incentivize municipalities that are not adequately providing GA while also recognizing the burden some municipalities are currently bearing because they end up providing support to people from all over the state.

Most recently the Department shared the state's budget constraints and their very real fears about the increasing costs to the GA program. We want to remind this committee that the baseline funding for GA has not been increased in many years even though the costs of every basic need it supports has.

We believe that the increase to 90% removes the financial burden on certain municipalities and more evenly distributes the work across the state. Year after year, legislation to increase the reimbursement rate for GA is introduced and yet nothing happens. The cost of living will continue to increase and the State needs to better acknowledge the way those costs impact municipal budgets whether it is through this bill or another that increases reimbursement rates. Thank you for the opportunity to comment. We urge you to vote in support of LD 978 and can be here for the work session for this and other bills, like LD 1029, that would make significant positive changes for the GA program.