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# Maine Equal Justice

## People Policy Solutions

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### **MEJ Testimony in *opposition* to LD 1459, An Act to Make General Assistance Officers Mandated Reporters**

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Good morning, 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. Today we are testifying in opposition to LD 1459.

General Assistance (GA) is an important program that helps people meet their basic needs like food, housing and medicine. People eligible for GA do not have the income or resources to meet their basic needs. Established as a “safety net of last resort,” the program supports many low-income people.

LD 1459 would make GA officers mandated reporters in the state of Maine. Given the frequent interactions between GA officers and people experiencing trauma, poverty or both, we do not support this authorization.

Child protective involvement is traumatic for both children and families and disproportionately affects Black and Brown children.<sup>1</sup> Too often a family’s struggle to pay for rent or maintain long term housing are misconstrued as neglect.

Families experiencing poverty are punished by the system and Maine’s Mandated Reporting and Community Support for Families Initiative, states that cases that are not substantiated are “not harm-neutral for families, and may result in fear and stigma that prevent families from seeking or accepting help.”<sup>2</sup> We cannot turn a blind eye to the relationship between socioeconomic status and the family separation crisis in the child welfare system.

Becoming a mandated reporter requires rigorous training. Just last session, legislation aimed at improving GA training unanimously passed in this committee. LD 1732, An Act to Expand the General Assistance Program requires trauma-informed and culturally linguistically appropriate services. Overall, the bill aimed to unify services across the state. Considering we are still

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.hrw.org/news/2022/11/17/us-child-welfare-system-harms-families>

<sup>2</sup>

<https://www.maine.gov/dhhs/sites/maine.gov.dhhs/files/inline-files/Maine%20Mandated%20Reporting%20and%20Community%20Support%20for%20Families%20Initiative%20-%20February%202025.pdf>

awaiting certain training to begin, making GA officers mandated reporters should not be a priority.

There are many mandated reporters in Maine. Those reporters are better suited to identify abuse than GA administrators who have minimal contact with families. Because the state has a broad definition of child abuse and neglect, the aforementioned report identified defining child abuse and neglect to improve mandated reporting and community support.<sup>3</sup> As we await better definitions, we should carefully consider making more people mandated reporters and focus on getting families the support they need. A report that does not meet the criteria for investigation often means a family does not get the help they may need.

For these reasons, we ask that you vote “Ought Not to Pass” on LD 1459. Thank you for your consideration.