



State of Maine
Office of the Public Advocate
112 State House Station, Augusta, Maine 04333-0112
(207) 624-3687 (voice) 711 (TTY)
www.maine.gov/meopa

Heather Sanborn
PUBLIC ADVOCATE

Testimony in Support
LD 889 “An Act to Amend the Laws Regarding the Department of Health and Human Services”

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Senator Ingwersen, Representative Meyer, and members of the Joint Standing Committee on Health and Human Services,

My name is Heather Sanborn, here today as Public Advocate, to testify in support of LD 889, “An Act to Amend the Laws Regarding the Department of Health and Human Services.” This testimony is in response to Representative Meyer’s Amendment circulated on May 21.

Low-income Mainers can receive critical financial assistance for essential living expenses, including home energy, electricity bills, and housing. However, many eligible households do not receive this support. In some cases, they may not be aware the programs exist; in others, they may not know how to apply. We also regularly hear from consumers that Community Action Program (CAP) agencies are overwhelmed, with long wait times for appointments, which creates additional barriers.

Outreach is challenging. For example, last fall the Department of Health and Human Services (DHHS) mailed approximately 70,000 letters to inform recipients they qualified for the Low-Income Assistance Program (LIAP), which provides a credit on electric bills. The letter included the necessary form to enroll. Yet, only about 20% of recipients ended up enrolling in the program. This low response rate means many missed an opportunity for meaningful financial relief—relief that could help avoid unpaid bills and reduce financial insecurity.

The Office of the Public Advocate supports DHHS’s initiative to implement “automatic enrollment” for eligible clients. Under this system, individuals who qualify for assistance would be automatically referred or enrolled in available programs. LD 889 provides the necessary legal framework for this process by requiring DHHS to obtain authorization from the client before sharing income and program enrollment information with the relevant service providers. The bill also ensures that clients have a clear and simple way to opt out if they choose.

LD 889 will make it easier for eligible Mainers to access help they desperately need—without placing additional burdens on them. It will also allow DHHS to move forward with a promising project that has the potential to reduce hardship for thousands.

I urge you to support LD 889. I am happy to answer any questions and to provide further information for the work session.

Respectfully submitted,

Heather Sanborn
Public Advocate