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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 889, An Act to Clarify the Release of Information in the Automatic Referral Project

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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.

Maine Equal Justice has been active at the State House for over 25 years. Our work focuses on many of the issues that affect people's daily lives – access to adequate health care, housing, transportation and childcare; food and income security; and higher education and training. MEJ works in partnership with people living in poverty to organize and advocate together for equitable laws and policies. We also provide education and training throughout the state on programs and policies that directly impact individuals and families living with limited means.

I'm here today to testify in support of LD 889, which amends 22 MRSA §3110, sub-§2[1] to clarify that as part of its Automatic Referral Project, DHHS will develop a process whereby someone can opt out of authorizing the release of their information at any time.

MEJ was involved in and supportive of the 2023 legislation, LD 1282, that initiated this data sharing project, and was then funded in the budget. One of the things MEJ frequently hears from people accessing economic security programs is the challenges they face navigating a siloed system. The administrative responsibility to deliver the help people need is scattered throughout different governmental agencies and is largely not integrated or coordinated. People need to share the same information – income and

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[1] https://legislature.maine.gov/statutes/22/title22sec3110.html

other documentation that needs to be verified – over and over again with different state agencies, telling their story again and again. This repetition can be both time consuming and, in many cases, retraumatizing for individuals struggling with challenging situations and life experiences.

The automatic data sharing project, which has been moving forward through the work of a diverse stakeholder group, of which MEJ is a part, will better coordinate enrollment across different programs, making it so that people only have to tell their story once. It will make it easier for people who are eligible for, but may not know about programs like LIAP (the Low Income Assistance Program which helps with electricity costs) and LIHEAP (the Home Energy Assistance Program which helps with heating costs), to access them. This is particularly important at a time when 84% of low income Mainers report being unable to pay a utility bill, according to a recent survey MEJ conducted.

We are heartened to see this technical amendment before you that clarifies that any data sharing process will provide an opt-out provision for anyone at any time. Based on our experience working with low-income Mainers, this strikes the right balance of advancing human-centered governmental efficiency with respecting confidentiality and the privacy of Mainers. As DHHS has noted, this change will ensure alignment with the project direction to provide the greatest benefit to clients, minimize the operational burdens of implementing the program, and preserve the ability for clients to decide how their data are used by being able to opt-out at any time. This will mirror what is already in place in states like Connecticut and Massachusetts.

We're excited for this project to continue with these additional clarifications and protections. This project will ultimately reduce administrative burden, make programs more coordinated and human-centered, and more likely to reach the people who need them most.

Thank you for your time and I'm happy to answer any questions you may have.

Ann Danforth