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Testimony of the Office for Family Independence
Maine Department of Health and Human Services

Before the Joint Standing Committee on Health and Human Services

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

Sponsor: Representative Meyer
Hearing Date: May 22, 2025

Senator Ingwersen, Representative Meyer, and members of the Joint Standing Committee on Health and Human Services, my name is Ian Yaffe, and I serve as the Director of the Office for Family Independence (OFI) in the Maine Department of Health and Human Services. I am here today to testify in support of LD 889, *An Act to Clarify the Release of Information in the Automatic Referral Project*.

The proposed legislation seeks to amend statute to support and increase the number of clients served by the department who are automatically referred to other services or resources that substantially promote the health and well-being of Mainers including the Home Energy Assistance Program (HEAP), the Low-Income Assistance Program (LIAP), Efficiency Maine programs, NextGen 529 plans, subsidized housing programs, and more. This bill will also ensure that clients can opt-out of authorizing the release of information for these referrals at any time.

An example of the positive impact made possible from this process is the nearly 70,000 ratepayers who could be automatically referred to the Low-Income Assistance Program (LIAP) through data matching with their electrical utilities, similar to processes already in place in Connecticut and Massachusetts. In partnership with the Public Utilities Commission, OFI sent approximately 70,000 households a letter last year saying that they were eligible for LIAP based on OFI data. Clients then needed to share this letter with their utility in order to be enrolled in LIAP. However, last year there were only 47,413 ratepayers who participated in LIAP. Through this project, nearly all of the 70,000 households that OFI thinks are eligible for LIAP based on the income that we already verified for other programs could be automatically referred to LIAP through data matching with their electrical utilities, with no additional effort required from household members, and less effort required from utilities to manually process those requests.

The Department held three stakeholder meetings in 2023 and 2024 to discuss goals of the Automatic Referral project and reviewed similar projects from other states. Stakeholders generally agreed that the approach utilized by Maine should generate the highest number of automatic referrals while respecting the ability of clients to decide how their data is used.

Stakeholders also had different data needs which are best served by a two-phase approach to implementing data sharing agreements following implementation: 1) OFI will build a custom data sharing agreement with each entity to match the entity's data with OFI data, beginning later in 2025 and in 2026. 2) Based on available resources, OFI will implement a "real-time" data look-up option for partner agencies to be able to verify income and means-tested program participation through OFI data.

OFI also reviewed what other states are doing to make automatic referrals to other programs. Connecticut has successfully implemented a similar version of this project which includes the Women, Infants, and Children (WIC) program, childcare assistance, tax credits, electrical discount rates, and tax preparation assistance. As of January 2024, only 1,800 individuals (0.2% of clients) in Connecticut chose to opt-out of the project. Massachusetts also uses a similar mechanism to verify income eligibility for housing programs, utility discounts, heating assistance, and free and reduced meals.

The language in this bill supports the Department's ability to meet the purpose of 22 M.R.S. § 3110, provide the greatest benefit to clients, minimize the operational burdens of implementing this program, and preserving the ability for clients to decide how their data is used by being able to opt-out at any time by contacting OFI. It also helps reduce the number of times that Mainers need to verify the same information across different state programs and resources. We urge support for this bill to support the implementation of this critical program this fall which will ease the burden of multiple program referrals and applications for Mainers in need.

Thank you for your time and attention. I would be happy to answer any questions you may have and to make myself available for questions at the work session.