

Good afternoon, Senator Rotondo, Representative Gattine, and members of the AFA Committee. My name is Hazel Willow, and I'm here today to speak about the Governor's proposed \$300 relief checks.

I appreciate the intent behind the checks. Getting unrestricted cash back into the hands of Mainers who are struggling is a good idea. Last year I was a participant in a pilot program for universal income. I experienced firsthand the dignity that comes with having financial breathing room.

I wasn't always someone who needed that breathing room. I was raised in a family that became wealthy. I had a high-paying job. I was someone who, on paper, wouldn't need an extra few hundred dollars.

Then I had to escape an abusive marriage. And in leaving, I didn't just lose my safety. I lost my career, my home, my healthcare, and my community. That's what financial abuse does—it methodically destroys your ability to be independent.

I spent time in a domestic violence shelter and have experienced chronic housing issues since. Which was the intention of my ex-husband. My abuser didn't have to stay around to do the work of destroying my life; he knew the system would finish it for him.

My child and I now rely on SNAP, TANF, housing vouchers, and MaineCare. I am deeply disabled and cannot work.

So when I look at the \$220 million proposal, I don't see a small check. I see a massive, one-time investment of our collective resources. And my question is: are we spending this in a way that actually interrupts a cycle that takes away Mainers agency and dignity, just like DV did to me?

\$300 is a band-aid. For a family trying to catch up on back rent or heating bills, it will be gone in a day. They will be right back in the same impossible position. The cost of sending these checks out is high—much higher than proven programs like the eviction prevention program. Investing a much smaller amount in rent relief can prevent evictions and keep families stable. But this money will be gone quickly, and the system will keep right on doing what it's doing.

The rainy day funds, spent strategically, could be a foundation. We could fully fund eviction prevention. We could lay the groundwork for a real, robust guaranteed income pilot—targeted, impactful, and consistent enough to give survivors like me a real way out. Not just survival for a day or a weekend, but a path to stability.

And here's something else: a program like rental assistance or universal childcare doesn't just help a family. That money gets injected directly into the Maine economy. It pays Maine salaries. It supports Maine businesses. A \$300 check sent out to individuals has no guarantee of ever coming back to our state. It could just as easily end up with an out-of-state online retailer.

We hear all the time that there isn't enough money. But there is over a billion dollars in the Rainy Day Fund. The question isn't if we have the money. **The question is: what kind of Maine are we choosing to build with it?** And how do we raise more to address the needs of the community over time?

When balancing the budget, please consider the worker, the elderly, the disabled, the single mom, the survivor—\$300 isn't going to fix our problems, we need long term investment. Take the Governor's idea and expand upon it.

Don't just give us a check that will be gone in a day. Give us the programs that will keep us housed, keep us fed, and give us a real chance to build a stable life.

Let's be strategic. Let's be smart. And let's make sure every dollar we spend is an investment that makes Maine stronger for all of us.

Thank you.