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Testimony in Support of LD 343, An Act To Set Aside Funds from Federal Block Grants for Certain Communities
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Good morning Senator Claxton, Representative Meyer, and members of the Joint Standing Committee on Health and Human Services. My name is Kathy Kilrain del Rio and I am the Director of Campaigns and Healthcare Advocacy for Maine Equal Justice, a nonprofit legal aid provider working to increase economic security, opportunity, and equity for people in Maine. **Today I am submitting testimony in support of LD 343, An Act To Set Aside Funds from Federal Block Grants for Certain Communities**, sponsored by Representative Talbot Ross.

Due to racial and economic inequities that are deeply embedded throughout our systems in Maine and the United States, Mainers and communities of color experience disparities in financial security, health, child wellbeing, and food security – really in every area for which this committee has oversight. Some examples of these disparities include:

- Mainers of color are less likely to have access to health care. For example, while 12% of white Mainers don't have a regular doctor or other health care provider, the same is true of 24% of Black Mainers, 21% of Hispanic/Latinx Mainers and 18% of Native Americans in Maine.¹ Affordability or exclusions (such as some immigrants being ineligible for MaineCare due to their immigration status) put health care out of reach.
- It is well documented that systemic racism and implicit bias are deeply ingrained in our health care system resulting in worse health outcomes for Black people, Indigenous people, and other people of color.^{2,3} Experiencing racism, which is a daily reality for Black Mainers, Indigenous Mainers, and other Mainers of color, negatively impacts the health of Mainers of color.⁴
- Mainers of color experience unemployment and poverty at twice the rate of white Mainers.⁵

¹ US CDC, Behavioral Risk Factors Surveillance Survey, 2014-2018 5-year average. Retrieved using the Web-Enabled Access Tool.

² <https://www.rwjf.org/en/library/collections/racism-and-health.html>

³ <https://www.americanprogress.org/issues/race/news/2020/03/27/482337/coronavirus-compounds-inequalityendangers-communities-color/>

⁴ <https://www.healthypeople.gov/2020/topics-objectives/topic/social-determinants-health/interventionsresources/discrimination>

⁵ Ibid.

- In 2018, 37% of Black Mainers lived below the poverty level as compared to 11.6% of white Mainers,⁶ 34% for Indigenous Mainers, 21% for Latinx Mainers, and 11% for Asian Mainers. While approximately 15% of white children live in poverty, the rate is 44% for children from Maine's Indigenous families and over 46% for children from Maine's Black families.
- As described in a report from the Center for American Progress, "blatant disparities in housing and economic well-being are due [for Indigenous communities], in part, to past public policies informed by manifest destiny that stripped Native communities of land, wealth, and opportunity."⁷
- 26% of Maine's homeless population is Black even though Black Mainers make up less than 2% of the population.⁸

You've heard other examples of disparities today and in many other hearings this year. But no matter how well intentioned, too often the programs and systems we create to address these disparities don't adequately distribute resources in an equitable way to the most vulnerable communities, especially Maine's Indigenous, Black, Latinx, Asian, and other communities of color.

By their very nature, block grants are inherently flexible, giving states a valuable tool to address some of the most serious problems they face, like racial inequity as addressed by this bill. But limited oversight and accountability of block grant allocations may mean we are missing the opportunity to fully address inequities. LD 343 would ensure that that opportunity is not lost by proactively targeting a portion of block grant funds to address the disproportionate and long-term health, social, and economic inequities that damage the lives of individuals and, with that, our prospects for a more just society. It highlights the need to examine both the equity and transparency with which these allocations are made today and gives us a path that provides the means and the opportunity to make an important difference for communities that have been historically underserved and who have experienced the most harm from unjust and inequitable policies and systems. While additional analysis may be needed to strengthen this bill's ability to meet its intent, that goal of increased equity and opportunity, is one that I believe we all strongly share.

For these reasons, we urge you to support of LD 343, amended as needed to respond to additional information or analysis that you may receive, but with an eye toward ensuring that the goal of this bill, to provide more equitable and transparent allocation of these resources, is effectively met. Maine Equal Justice would be happy to help with any needed amendments and participate in work sessions as needed. I'm also happy to answer any questions you have today. Thank you.

⁶<https://data.census.gov/cedsci/table?t=Income%20and%20Poverty&g=0400000US23&tid=ACSST5Y2018.S1701&hidePreview=true>

⁷<https://www.americanprogress.org/issues/race/reports/2019/08/07/472617/systemic-inequality-displacement-exclusion-segregation/>

⁸https://maineequaljustice.org/site/assets/files/2284/stateofpovertyinmaine8_5x11_1-4-21.pdf