

Janet T. Mills
Governor

Jeanne M. Lambrew, Ph.D.
Commissioner



Maine Department of Health and Human Services
Commissioner's Office
11 State House Station
109 Capitol Street
Augusta, Maine 04333-0011
Tel: (207) 287-3707; Fax: (207) 287-3005
TTY: Dial 711 (Maine Relay)

Testimony of the Department of Health and Human Services
Before the Joint Standing Committee on Health and Human Services

In support of LD 78

*An Act to Protect Children from Extreme Poverty by Preserving Children's Access to
Temporary Assistance for Needy Families Benefits*

Sponsored by Representative Michele Meyer
Hearing Date: April 1, 2021

Representative Meyer, Senator Claxton, and Members of the Joint Standing Committee on Health and Human Services, I am Molly Bogart, Director of Government Relations for the Maine Department of Health and Human Services. Thank you for the opportunity to help introduce and strongly support LD 78, *An Act To Protect Children from Extreme Poverty by Preserving Children's Access to Temporary Assistance for Needy Families Benefits*. I want to express my deep gratitude to Representative Meyer for her partnership on this proposal, and to Senator Moore, Representative Perry, and the other co-sponsors for their support. Put simply, this important piece of legislation will ensure that children are not penalized for the actions of their parents.

The existing Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) statute and regulations require that when a parent does not confirm compliance with work requirements or attend required meetings for more than 90 days, or has had a sanction in the past, the entire household loses their benefits. This is referred to as a "Full Family Sanction." Most participants in the Additional Support for People in Retraining and Employment (ASPIRE) Program come back into compliance within the 90-day window; however, there are instances in which a parent or guardian may not comply within 90 days, or does not comply more than once. This may include a case where one parent is in full compliance and participating completely in the program, but another parent who is, for whatever reason, non-compliant. In those instances, benefits are stopped for all members of the household, including the children.

The current Full Family Sanction policy puts our children at greater risk of not having their basic needs – food, clothes and shelter – met. No child can or should be held accountable for the actions of their parent or guardian.

As proposed, this bill would eliminate the Full Family Sanction, meaning that benefits issued on behalf of a child or children, as well as any other eligible household members that remain in compliance with program requirements would continue, while benefits for a non-compliant adult would be reduced or stopped. In addition, if both parents, or the parent in a single-parent household, are not complying, then the household becomes a "child-only household" and continues to receive critical financial benefits to meet the needs of the children.

Income eligibility for the TANF program cash benefit is much lower than many other assistance programs, and thus participants in the program are some of the most financially disadvantaged in our State. In 2019, 13.8 percent of Maine’s children were living in poverty – higher than all the New England states except Rhode Island.¹

In 2019, there were 912 Full Family Sanctions applied to TANF cases in Maine. Children in these households, and some parents who were meeting their own program requirements, lost access to this critical benefit based on the non-compliance of another adult in the family. Research increasingly shows that full-family sanctions cause increased hardship and harm for families with children.² We have the opportunity to do what is right by the children of Maine by correcting this policy, and I ask for your support of this proposal.

Again, thank you for the opportunity to discuss LD 78 with you, and please know that the Department and the Office for Family Independence are available to provide any information that may be helpful as you consider this legislation. Thank you for your time, and I would be happy to answer any questions.

¹ <https://datacenter.kidscount.org/data/tables/1562-children-in-poverty-by-county-2005-2019#detailed/2/any/false/1729,37,871,870,573,869,36,868,867,133/any/11725,3331>

² Donna Pavetti, “TANF Studies Show Work Requirement Proposals for Other Programs Would Harm Millions, Do Little to Increase Work”, Center on Budget and Policy Priorities, November 2018, <https://www.cbpp.org/sites/default/files/atoms/files/11-13-18tanf.pdf>