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Testimony of Rep. Richard Evans 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”

April 1, 2021

Good morning Senator Claxton, Representative Meyer and members of the Health and Human Services Committee. I am Representative Richard Evans, and I represent seven communities in Piscataquis County. I am here today to speak in favor of introduce LD 78, “An Act To Protect Children from Extreme Poverty by Preserving Children's Access to Temporary Assistance for Needy Families Benefits.”

Piscataquis County is a beautiful, wonderful place, but not without its problems. One of its larger problems is the level of poverty. The level of poverty in general, and especially the percentage of children in poverty, is much higher than the state average. Statewide the percentage of children under 17 living in poverty is 13.8%, but in Piscataquis County that percentage is 23.8%.

Not only is the problem of poverty greater in Piscataquis County than most of the rest of the state, getting assistance is tougher there as well. There is currently no permanent DHHS office in Piscataquis County. Residents are expected to either drive to Bangor (a 50 minute drive one – way from Dover-Foxcroft and longer from the outlying parts of the County) or use the internet to apply for programs like TANF.

Transportation, as you know, is a considerable problem for people in poverty and access to reliable internet service is difficult in much of Piscataquis County. This combines to make it more challenging for people in my part of the state to meet the requirements to keep their benefits.

Under current law, the Department of Health and Human Services can and does terminate assistance under the TANF program to an entire family, including children, if one parent fails to comply with the requirements of the family contract. In effect, current law punishes children for the errors of their parents. And these errors, as I stated above, are, in my part of the state at least, often committed without intent just because of the difficulties in communicating with the department.

This bill would change this provision of the law to terminate benefits for the noncomplying parent, but it would allow assistance to the children and complying parents to continue.

This is a humane and fair way of dealing with the problem of non-compliance,

Thank you very much for your consideration.