



Testimony in Support of LD 78/HP0044
An Act To Protect Children from Extreme Poverty by Preserving Children's Access to Temporary Assistance for Needy Families Benefits

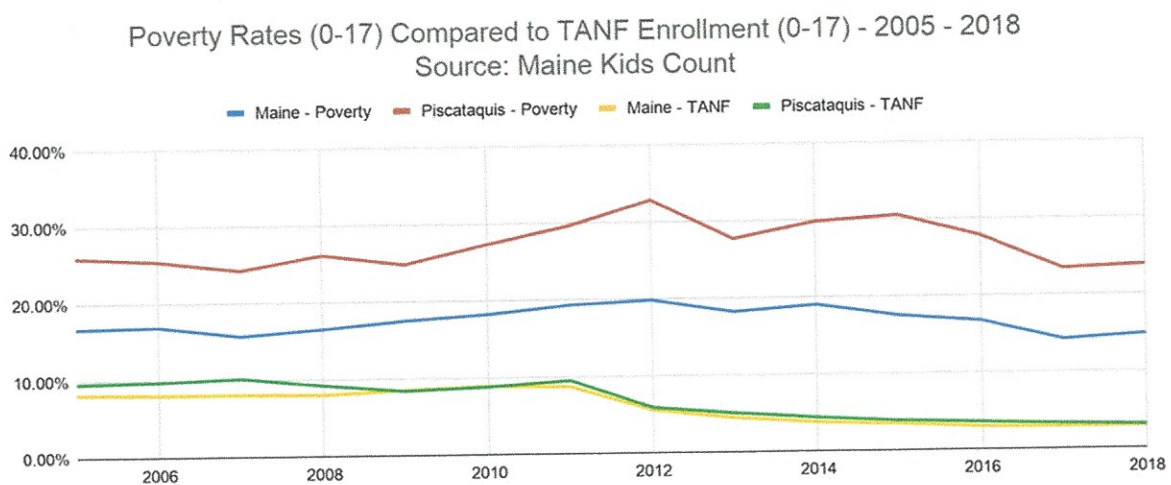
March 31, 2021

Dear Senator Claxton, Representative Meyers and Members of the Joint Legislative Committee on Health and Human Services,

My name is Sue Mackey Andrews and I reside in Dover-Foxcroft (Piscataquis County). I submit this testimony in support of L.D. 78 on behalf of our local coalition, Helping Hands with Heart, which has advocated for families and children in this region for more than 22 years.

I first want to thank you for your service and for the heartfelt advocacy that you demonstrate every day as a member of the Health and Human Services Committee. Under normal circumstances, this role is challenging and I can only imagine the many pressures and competing priorities that you face under these Pandemic circumstances. Thank you!

The chart below reflects TANF enrollment in our county from 2006 to 2018. These are DHHS data which compare a couple of variables – State and County Poverty, and State and County TANF enrollment. The chart clearly evidences the disparity in levels of poverty and TANF enrollment for our county vs. state, over time.



This chart illustrates our region as having a poverty rate for children close to 25% but only 5% of our families are TANF recipients. While I can't say with certainty that enrollment is affected due to the full family sanction, *I do believe that we desperately need to reduce the barriers for children and families to receive benefits for which they are eligible and helping them meet their basic needs.*

While this Pandemic has been challenging, it also has taught us many lessons which – as we move forward – can inform important policymakers – each of YOU - about deep, systemic changes that need to happen in order for all of our systems to effectively respond to the needs of all Mainers. Now is the time for policymakers to be creative, bold and imaginative – and to remove barriers that have historically made equity and access to essential services and supports out of the reach of too many in need.

This Pandemic has taught us about the deep disparities that exist throughout our State, including where I live. It has laid bare the poverty, social isolation, limited if any access to transportation, or broadband for our kids to participate in “virtual school.” During the first many months of the Pandemic, too often the most welcomed sight for families was that school bus carrying meals and snack for kids.

In our county, over the past year, we have seen food cupboard lines expand four- and five-fold too often meaning recipients wait in lines for up to 2.5-3 hours to receive their food. This reality is only one visible sign of the deep poverty, isolation, and a lack of access to health care, transportation, childcare and mental health services. During the Pandemic, these needs only deepened to now include families who were coping paycheck to paycheck before March 2020 and are now learning about programs and services that they used to think were for those “other” families – not them.

One reality driven home during this Pandemic is how hard people work but still remain in poverty. A recent survey that we conducted informed us that more than 40% of families in our region work two or more jobs. These demands too often result in a loss of public benefits due to missed appointments, missing documentation or competing demands that can too often become immobilizing. The majority of families living in poverty in our region, prior to the Pandemic, were working and still struggling mightily to “get by.”

In March 2020, the Pandemic showed how much families in poverty depend upon the childcare programs and the schools to not only care for and teach their kids – but to feed them, sometimes to clothe them, and too often – to protect them. We learned that many of these families were considered “essential” but now lacked care and resources for their children.

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They weren't able to tele-commute or take time off work to "homeschool" their child. Too often, that high schooler – or in a couple of cases – the middle schooler – had to defer their own school to care for younger siblings while parents worked or slept in between jobs.

I do believe, and I hope that you do also, that all parents care desperately about their children and often the circumstances of life are a barrier to their ability to demonstrate this. I urge you to pass this bill and to use this opportunity to better understand what the barriers are for families enrolled in TANF, while still ensuring that they have adequate supports to properly feed and clothe their children.

We need to stop penalizing children through sanctions that they had nothing to do with.

Instead, let's use this opportunity to learn about the barriers and engage in even deeper systems reforms that ensure equity, access and serve to support people to move into economic well-being. I urge you to support and pass this bill to maximize support to children through this federally-funded program while also holding participants accountable for program compliance.

Thank you again – for your service and your willingness to think and act "outside of the box" in these very extraordinary times.

My best,



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