

HOMELESS VOICES FOR JUSTICE

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Testimony in Opposition to LD 1815, LD 1820, LD 1822, and LD 1842

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Good afternoon, Senator Craven, Representative Farnsworth, and members of the Joint Standing Committee on Health and Human Services. My name is Jim Devine and I am an advocate with Homeless Voices for Justice. I am here today to testify in opposition to four bills – LD 1815, LD 1820, LD 1822 and LD 1842.

Homeless Voices for Justice is a grassroots group that works for social change on behalf of people who are experiencing homelessness and poverty. We advocate for solutions to issues that impact Maine's most vulnerable individuals and communities, and aim to influence policies that will improve the lives of every man, woman, and child living in poverty.

Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) is an extremely valuable resource for families who are barely getting by. This program provides relief for parents and children who are living in poverty and need help paying for basic necessities such as rent, heat, diapers, and laundry. For a family of three, the monthly benefit is only \$485. That is nowhere near enough to meet a families' cost of living. LD 1815, LD 1820, and LD 1822 would have devastating impacts on families who are looking for temporary assistance to get back on their feet. We find these bills only demonize those who are looking for help to get by. These bills do not address the real problem of poverty and how to lift families out of it.

LD 1815 would require TANF applicants to apply for three jobs in order to be eligible for benefits. We find this to be unnecessary and harmful to families who are in need of help but are unable to work. Families who benefit from TANF face many barriers to employment, some of which include coping with a disability, not owning a vehicle, domestic violence, and not having access to a computer. An overall lack of available jobs also serves as a barrier. By requiring people to apply for jobs when they are not in a situation to do so, or when there are no jobs available, is setting people up to fail. Instead of putting energy into this bill, we should be looking at ways to improve the job market in Maine. Denying families critical support because they would not meet this work search requirement is the wrong thing to do.

LD 1820 would prohibit any TANF recipient from using their Electronic Benefit Transfer (EBT) card across state lines. We truly believe that recipients of TANF should be able to access their benefits wherever and whenever they need to. What about those families who live close to the state border? And what if a family is visiting with relatives in Massachusetts? According to this bill, should a family need to access their benefits when they are in a state other than Maine, they would not be able to. This isn't right. Recently, a friend of mine experienced a loss in her family and she had to travel to Boston for the services. What if this happened to a family who receives TANF and a situation arose where they needed to access their benefits while in Boston? Or Portsmouth? With this bill, they wouldn't be able to. A death

in the family is already difficult enough to deal with. The stress of having to worry about how they will be able to pay for diapers or food should not be added during this time. We find this bill to be very troubling, as it would only make accessing benefits even harder.

LD 1822 would add even more restrictions to the use of EBT cards for families who receive TANF. We believe the energy going into this effort to reduce fraud is misguided, and feel that it only strengthens negative stereotypes of people with low incomes. Fraud is not the problem. Poverty is. And there should be a greater effort to help people rise out of poverty instead of punishing them for their unfortunate circumstance. This bill is another measure that makes people, who are struggling to get by, out to look like they are the "bad guys." It is for these reasons that we strongly oppose this bill.

LD 1842 would eliminate "good cause" for people unable to meet TANF participation requirements such as those with disabilities, no transportation, or victims of domestic violence. This elimination would result in a higher number of people sanctioned, without income and resulting in homelessness. LD 1842 also repeals the Parents as Scholars program, which offers TANF recipients a route out of poverty and back on their feet. LD 1842 is a step backwards for Maine families.

HVJ strongly urges you to vote Ought Not to Pass on LD 1815, LD 1820, and LD 1822. These bills would have devastating impacts on our most vulnerable friends and neighbors and would only push them deeper and deeper into poverty. These bills are bad for Maine and Maine people.

Thank you.

On behalf of Homeless Voices for Justice,

Jim Devine