

## Testimony of the Maine Association of Interdependent Neighborhoods

### In Support of LD 1268

### In Opposition to LD 1097, LD 452, LD 1144, LD 1375

Good afternoon Senator Brakey, Representative Gattine and members of the Health and Human Services committee. I'm Kandje Cleaves, I live in Garland and I'm here today as a member of the Maine Association of Interdependent Neighborhoods, a volunteer-run coalition of Maine people working together to improve the lives of people living with low income. We speak in support of LD 1268 and in opposition to LD 1097, 452, 1144 and 1375.

I have lived experience in the community that you are speaking about and making decisions about today. I know what it is to be poor. The best way to help people out of poverty is to create opportunity not further punish people. Employment with no supports often leaves a family in poverty drowning. Employment with steps to greater opportunity creates stability in families and a sustainable work situation. This is the goal of LD 1268. Many of the other bills before you today only discipline families and create barriers to success.

As you probably know, to be eligible for TANF a family must show that their children are deprived of the care and support of at least one parent. This means that one parent doesn't contribute substantially to the care and support of the children. Unfortunately, this rule is interpreted in widely differing ways, depending on the DHHS eligibility worker. However, if a child lives with both parents or sees both parents on a regular basis, it's likely, with some exceptions, that the family will not be eligible for TANF. And often, the way deprivation is interpreted hurts Maine families profoundly. I want to share a few stories with you now that show how the deprivation rule hurts families when they work together to raise their children, even if they don't live together and even if the non-custodial parent doesn't contribute financially to the children's household. I will read a couple now and I've attached others for your reference.

- A single mom from Livermore Falls was in her first 6 months at a new job and though she was earning sick time she wasn't allowed to take it during the 6 month probationary period. Her children were sick twice and she was sick once and she got fired. She applied for TANF as she didn't have enough work history for unemployment benefits. She was denied because the children's father sees them on average about two days a week.
- A mom from Knox County had been getting TANF and volunteering as her ASPIRE participation. The child's father who lived several miles away had been unable to find work but had been riding his bicycle several miles a day to come babysit for their child while mom volunteered. Then DHHS said that because dad is seeing the child several times a week, mom is no longer eligible for TANF. So

mom had to find other childcare for the child and not only did ASPIRE then have to pay for daycare but the child was now deprived of the frequent contact with his father which in our opinion is detrimental to not only the family, but to society as a whole.

- A mom from Oakland was denied TANF due to lack of deprivation because the child goes to see dad frequently on the weekends. Dad doesn't pay child support and doesn't take the child if she's sick and even refused to take the child temporarily when mom was homeless. The only way that mom would be able to get TANF to help stabilize her life would be if she limits the child's contact with her father to just every other weekend or so.
- A family from Augusta which includes dad who works in Freeport, two children, and mom who has early stages of Multiple Sclerosis. Dad's car broke down and he'll lose his job if he can't get to work. Even though they are income eligible, they cannot get help from the Alternative Aid program which is funded with TANF dollars and subject to TANF rules because of lack of deprivation.

Please take seriously the positive changes that LD 1268 proposes on this issue.

To close, I have some questions for the committee related to some of the proposals before you today:

What does making it impossible to pay the rent by restricting cash withdrawals do to help families move out of poverty?

What does a requirement to apply for 3 jobs before being allowed to apply for TANF do when someone isn't in a position to take those jobs? Anyone from a small community like mine knows the bridges you can burn when you apply for a job but can't follow through for good reasons. An employer offers you a job once and you can't meet the obligation, they are less likely to give you another chance.

What does eliminating good cause – and requiring an ASPIRE participant to work or volunteer even when they are ill, or their child care falls apart or there's a storm and even state offices are closed do to help move people out of poverty? These are reasons that anyone of us would not be able to go to work on a particular day, but these good cause exemptions will be ignored and people will lose their TANF if LD 1375 is approved.

What does requiring Parents As Scholars students to work or volunteer 20 or 30 hours a week in addition to full time school while being a single parent do to help them work their way out of poverty? In fact, it will make it impossible for most parents to be successful in college and leave them in the low wage labor market and perennially dependent on public benefits. .

Many of these proposals before you today just create bigger and steeper obstacles for those already struggling. But LD 1268 has what it takes to provide stepping stones to help families make progress. It takes opportunity. It takes stability. It takes child care, it takes training, it takes transportation, it takes GIVING PEOPLE A BREAK. That's what it looks like to respond effectively. Please join me and the thousands of families across Maine who are working to provide for their families in coming up with real solutions for reducing poverty.

Thank you.

1. A mom from the town of Washington had been getting TANF and volunteering as her ASPIRE participation. The child's father who lived several miles away had been unable to find work but had been riding his bicycle several miles a day to come babysit for their child while mom volunteered. Then DHHS said that because dad is seeing the child several times a week, mom is no longer eligible for TANF. So mom had to find other childcare for the child and not only did ASPIRE then have to pay for child care but the child was now deprived of the frequent contact with his father which was unfortunate for the child and for our community.
2. A mom from Oakland was denied TANF due to lack of deprivation because the child goes to see dad frequently on the weekends. Dad doesn't pay child support and doesn't take the child if she's sick and even refused to take the child temporarily when mom was homeless. The only way that mom would be able to get TANF to help stabilize her life would be if she cuts back the child's contact with her father to once every other week or so.
3. A mom from Sebec had a two year old child and 8 month old twins with serious disabilities. Child Protective Services required the mom to separate from her husband which she did. He gets supervised visitation with the children almost daily but is not allowed to take the children or be alone with them. This mom went to DHHS to apply for TANF and was told not to bother as there is no deprivation because dad sees the children almost every day.
4. A mom from Old Town was receiving TANF and going to college through the Parents as Scholars program. Dad started taking his child occasionally on the weekends. The child wouldn't go to dad's if she was sick and dad did not participate in any of the child's school activities, help with her homework, attend well child check-ups or pay child support. Mom was told that now that dad's in the picture she could no longer get TANF benefits and she was concerned that she'd have to drop out of college. DHHS eventually decided that dad's contact was minimal enough that deprivation still existed but it was a very stressful time for this single mom who is trying to attend school full time and raise her child pretty much on her own.
5. A mom from Livermore Falls was in her first 6 months at a new job and though she was earning sick time she wasn't allowed to take it during the 6 month probationary period. Her children were sick twice and she was sick once and she got fired. She applied for TANF but she was denied because the children's father sees them on average about two days a week.
6. This household consists of mom, her 18 year old daughter, and three minor children. Mom separated from her husband due to domestic violence and had hoped that TANF would be available to help her get out of the abusive situation. However, the Protection From Abuse Order allowed dad to have the children 50% of the time. Her children have a lot of both mental and physical health issues. She had 26 appointments for her children over a period of 3 months and her husband never took them to a single appointment. There was a meeting with providers where the providers called the father twice to attend the meeting and he never showed. So even though he has the children in his household 50% of the time, he does not provide 50% of the care. Yet, DHHS claimed that the children were not deprived so this mom was left with no source of income.

7. A teen mom from North Vassalboro got TANF while she was pregnant but it ended as soon as the child was born because mom lived with the child's father. Neither mom nor dad have been able to find work and being so young, neither of them have enough of a work history to qualify for TANF for Unemployed Parents.
8. A mom with two children from Biddeford was getting TANF benefits. Dad would see the children occasionally on the weekends but he had no phone and mom had no transportation so she was never able to rely on dad to help with issues around raising the children. Dad took her to an appointment with DHHS one day and when the worker saw that dad was with the family, she terminated the family's TANF due to lack of deprivation.
9. Family from Augusta which includes dad who works in Freeport, two children, and mom who has early stages of Multiple Sclerosis. Dad's car broke down and he'll lose his job if he can't get to work. Even though they are income eligible, they cannot get help from the Alternative Aid program because of lack of deprivation.
10. A two parent family with two children from Corinth. Both parents are working at low paying jobs and are income eligible for Alternative Aid. Their car broke down and they'll both lose their jobs if they cannot get to work but again, they were denied due to lack of deprivation.
11. A family from Freeport that includes a mom, dad, and three children were denied Alternative Aid because dad works more than 100 hours per month. The rules require that applicants must have worked less than 100 hours during a 30 day period prior to application in order to qualify Alternative Aid under the TANF-UP program. So even though they were within the income limits, and dad was likely to lose his job if he was not able to get car repairs, they were denied assistance.