

# Maine Children's Alliance



Testimony of Claire Berkowitz,  
Executive Director of the Maine Children's Alliance

Before the Joint Standing committee on Appropriations & Financial Affairs

## Comments regarding proposed legislation to reform TANF and Other Anti-Poverty Programs April 24, 2017

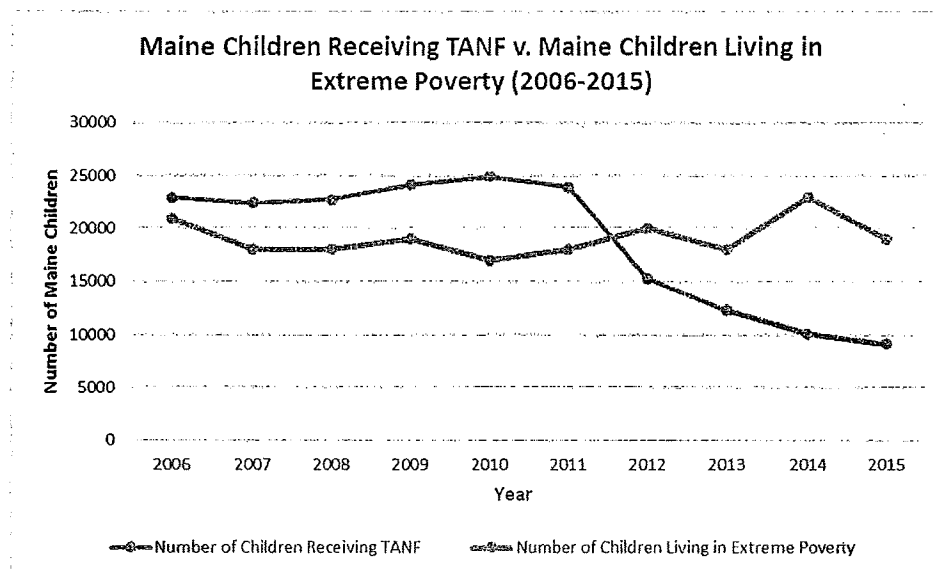
Dear Senator Brakey, Representative Hymanson and members of the Joint Standing Committee on Health and Human Services, my name is Claire Berkowitz and I am Executive Director of the Maine Children's Alliance. The Maine Children's Alliance is a state-wide nonpartisan, non-profit research and advocacy organization whose mission is to advocate for sound policies and promote best practices to improve the lives of Maine's children youth and families.

I regret not being with the you today, but I would like to submit written testimony regarding the anti-poverty program bills that you are considering today. Some of these bills create real reform and bring opportunity to the next generation of Maine children. But unfortunately, some of the bills do the opposite and undermine the primary goal of TANF, which is to provide assistance to needy children.

When Maine children thrive, our families, communities and state thrive – we all benefit. So as you consider the many bills before you today I urge you to ask yourself, “Are these reforms good for Maine children?”

At its core, TANF, is intended to improve and protect the lives of Maine children. For children living in poverty, TANF fills the gaps and provide parents with the tools they need to get and maintain a job, heat their homes, pay their rent and put food on the table. **Essentially, TANF is what helps keeps these children from going without basic essentials.**

Over the last five years, Maine has seen dramatic cuts to the TANF program without the same decline in need. As of 2011, the TANF program served nearly 24,000 Maine children but by December of 2016, the program served fewer than 8,000 children.<sup>i</sup> Yet, in 2015, 19,000 children lived in extreme poverty – families earning less than 50 percent of the federal poverty level.<sup>ii</sup>



**In other words, the TANF program did not even serve half of the number of children who needed it.**

Reforming the TANF program should involve improvements that make the program more effective in helping children and families permanently pull themselves out of poverty. The following bills that you are considering today would do just that:

- **LD 336, *An Act to Amend the Requirements of the Temporary Assistance for Needy Families Program*.** This legislation (1) removes the requirements that currently prevent 2-parent families from receiving TANF; and (2) increases the special housing allowance for TANF families with high housing costs from \$200 to \$300 a month. Today Maine is one of only 10 states that still penalizes two-parent families even if that family's income is just as low as a qualifying household headed by a single parent.
- **LD 481, *An Act to Promote Workforce Participation*.** This bill addresses the welfare "cliff" by increasing the amount of a TANF family's earned income that is disregarded (not counted) in determining the amount of assistance it can receive. The amount disregarded is reduced slightly over time as parents make the transition to more stable employment—but never below the current level. This bill improves the design of the TANF program by cushioning the loss of benefits as a family transitions into work.
- **LD 1302, *An Act to Increase Workforce Participation in the Temporary Assistance for Needy Families and Other Assistance Programs*.** This bill requires the Department of Health and Human Services (DHHS) to create a program to provide transportation-related assistance, including car repairs, inspection and registration for working parents participating in the TANF and SNAP Program. TANF/ASPIRE families already have access to most of these services; working SNAP families with children would receive the greatest benefit from this bill. Research shows that low income families with reliable transportation have more job stability, employment options and are more likely to earn higher wages.

Instead of opening up opportunity for parents, and subsequently their children, some of the proposed legislation that you are considering today will close doors and trap these families in poverty. With harsh time limits, sanction policies, and other penalties already in effect, the extreme proposals outlined below would make Maine an outlier compared to most states and less equipped to effectively reduce poverty:

- **LD 33, *An Act to Adjust the Lifetime Limit for the Receipt of TANF Benefits*.** This bill reduces the lifetime limit for TANF benefits from 60 months to 36 months. This proposal would place Maine in a distinct minority of states with less than a 60-month lifetime limit—only 14 states have a lifetime limit that is less than 60-months. Real reform does not simply cut people off from help they need. Instead we must do a better job, from day one, of helping people get the tools they need to find and keep a job to leave poverty behind.
- **LD 477, *An Act to Prevent Long-term Welfare Dependency*.** This bill would require applicants for the Alternative Aid Program seeking employment to participate in job search activities that are consistent with the job search activities for participants in the ASPIRE Program. This legislation puts the cart before the horse—families in crisis need help to overcome that crisis before they can look for work or get back to work, not more barriers that prevent them from moving forward.
- **LD 1017, *An Act to Strengthen Work Participation in the Temporary Assistance for Needy Families Program*.** This bill removes all the good cause exceptions (except domestic violence) that prevent a person from being sanctioned (losing benefits) under TANF program when they are not able to participate in work activities as required. Our welfare system should be smart, accountable, and fair. This policy is extremely unfair as it would punish families for circumstances that are beyond their control; circumstances that happen to all of us -- like having a sick child or a car that breaks down. Only three states apply such extreme penalties; the overwhelming majority of states allow good cause reasons similar to Maine's recognizing the unfairness and harm that would result without them.
- **LD 1052, *An Act To Allow Drug Testing Prior to Providing Welfare Benefits* and LD 1075, *An Act To Eliminate Drug Use among Welfare Recipients*.** These bills would require all applicants and recipients: (1) be given a written drug screening test for DHHS to determine there is a "reasonable suspicion" of illegal drug use; (2) with a drug related felony conviction in the past 20 years will be presumed to be ineligible for TANF, even if that conviction is no longer considered a felony; and (3) that a DHHS worker thinks may be using an illegal drug or controlled substance will be presumed ineligible for TANF. Any TANF applicants or recipients who test "positive" based upon the above criteria will be denied/terminated from TANF even if they are willing to enter treatment. While there is universal acknowledgement that there is a crisis with opioid addiction and a lack of treatment options for people struggling with addiction, these policies are not the solution. They do nothing to help and instead would only make the effects of the crisis much worse for families with kids by depriving of them of income needed to meet their basic needs.

As child and family advocates, the Maine Children's Alliance supports policies that transforms lives and makes Maine a more hopeful and prosperous place for us all to live. Maine's success is incumbent upon the success of its children. If we want Maine children to thrive, we need to reduce the number of children living in poverty. This starts with supporting and strengthening effective anti-poverty programs like TANF. Therefore, I urge you to support LD 336, LD 481 and LD 1302 and reject LD 33, LD 477, LD 1017, LD 1052 and LD 1075. Thank you for considering my comments.

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<sup>i</sup> Maine Department of Health and Human Services, Office of Family Independence.

<sup>ii</sup> Population Reference Bureau, analysis of data from the U.S. Census Bureau, Census 2000 Supplementary Survey, 2001 Supplementary Survey, 2002 through 2015 American Community Survey.