

April 10, 2017

My name is Allen Ewing-Merrill. I'm here today as pastor of HopeGateway, a United Methodist Church in Portland; and as Vice President of the Maine Council of Churches. I was born in Maine, I grew up in a small town in the Midcoast, I've lived in Maine nearly all my life, and I'm a tax payer. I care deeply about the wellbeing of Mainers who are struggling to make ends meet, who find themselves in vulnerable situations, and that's why I must speak against LD's 10, 36, 219, and 220 — all of which are intended to stigmatize and penalize those on the margins.

You must know, General Assistance is the assistance program of last resort. As such, it provides the very basics: a roof over someone's head, food to eat, heat in the winter. You must know, the people who rely on General Assistance — generally for a short period of time — are really, really struggling.

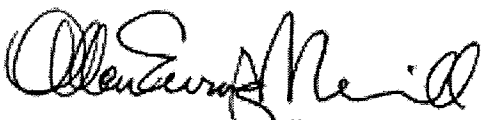
It feels important to remind you that the people who stand to lose if these measures you're considering today are adopted are children of God. They are your brothers, your sisters, your siblings. It seems to me the only way anyone could feel good about taking away a roof over someone's head — taking away the food their bodies need for nourishment — taking away their heat in the winter — the only way you can feel okay about that is to dehumanize them — to reduce them to impersonal, disembodied statistics — to set aside the reality that we're talking about human beings just like you and me. Although it feels more comfortable to distance ourselves from those who live in poverty, when we're honest we have to acknowledge, there is no "us and them" — only us. We are one.

Both the Hebrew and the Christian Scriptures remind us that one of the roles and responsibilities of government is to provide for the common good — to care for the most vulnerable and marginalized of our society. In the words of Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, "We are caught up in an inescapable network of mutuality, tied in a single garment of destiny. Whatever affects one directly affects all of us indirectly." The decisions you make today will affect not only the recipients of General Assistance; they will affect all of us. The decisions that you will make are not simply a matter of dollars and cents. In the end, these decisions are about who we are as a state, and the values we hold.

As a religious leader, let me remind you that a budget is a moral document. The decisions you make have moral and ethical implications. It is unconscionable to think about cutting off GA and other assistance for the most vulnerable members of our society — many of whom already face extreme hardship, trauma, and loss. Turning our backs on them now will not make their need for food or shelter evaporate. It will simply leave them homeless, hungry, and destitute. If we think things are challenging now, please consider that catastrophic result.

Finally, because I know there are misunderstandings about this, let me be clear: While General Assistance is miniscule within the State budget — barely even discernable in a pie chart — it is simply not true that if the state backs out on its responsibility, faith communities and other nonprofits stand ready to pick up the slack. That myth is not based in reality. I speak for faith leaders and nonprofits throughout Maine when I say there is simply no way we can provide housing, food, and utilities for those who are denied access to General Assistance. We are doing all that we can, and we're grateful to do it, but in these challenging days, we are stretched thin.

I urge you to make right and compassionate and just decisions. We can not balance a budget, or provide tax cuts for the comfortable, on the backs of those who are living in poverty. We can not do that. We must not do that. We are better than that.



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