

Mary Donahue

Testimony before Health and Human Services Committee in Opposition to LD 452 and 1375 and  
in Support of LD 1268

Senator Brakey, Representative Gattine and members of the Joint Standing Committee on Health and Human Services, my name is Mary Donahue and I live in York. I am here today to testify in opposition to LD 452 and 1375, and in support of LD 1268. I am a psychologist with offices in both York and Sanford, and I specialize in abuse and trauma. As such, I see people from all levels of socio-economic status with a multitude of needs. My focus is on change and I concentrate how to motivate people toward change.

I believe that LD 452 and 1375 are poor choices for Maine in that they are punitive measures and don't support people to do what you want them to do—and what they want to do too. What I have learned in my business is that people are human, no matter what their income level, and motivation cannot be developed using punishment and deprivation. Humans have a natural inclination to achieve; if we didn't we'd all still live in caves. Working has many benefits besides a salary; having a set schedule, social reinforcement, and sense of empowerment, for example. However, it's basic human behavior to push back when feeling forced to do something—particularly something that we think comes from misunderstanding or intent to unfairly punish. A review of all the research literature on punishment demonstrates that such punishment tends to teach a child – or other recipient – not how to engage in a new behavior but, rather, how to avoid humiliation and shame. This freezes forward movement and stops the creation of new thought processes. Indeed, it robs people of dignity and focuses anger – in this case – on the State.

As many DHHS caseworkers that I have spoken with can attest, too much of our current approach brings anxiety, numbness, and animosity...motivating people to resist unfair requirements. LD 452 would serve to reinforce this dynamic between the State and recipients, requiring more punitive measures, and more cuts, and more and more of the same.

Further, LD 1375 appears to completely disempower people from “good cause” considerations and/or an appeals process to protect people from decisions that might be made by DHHS caseworkers via inexperience or unawareness *before* punishments are imposed. Indeed, it has been my experience that when I call DHHS for help with understanding something, I might get two different answers to the same question; I then call a third time and take the best two-out-of-three. That a family could be sanctioned without first having the opportunity to appeal that decision is horrifying to me.

HOWEVER, people who are included in reasoning and who experience the personal profitability of work and choice, whose voices are heard, tend to be more apt to make lasting change;

Thus, let's reinforce the many benefits of working. LD 1268 is one way to do this as it helps to create change by creating safety enough for new workers to discover the experience of working, not just in terms of having earned money. In order to create or strengthen the pathways in the brain that support change, policies must reinforce self-esteem, assist new workers in the experience of accomplishment, and help them to realize their potential. By supporting LD1268, you will be giving people time to recognize the true benefits of being a part of the workforce. Currently, when one gets a new job, all benefits are often cut off...immediate survival – rather than long-term stability – becomes the focus. How can a new worker have the time or where-with-all to manage new family schedules, learn new skills, handle social interactions, or even make decisions about benefits opportunities when they are penalized for having gotten a job, i.e., having done as they were encouraged? Further, entering into the workforce can be expensive in terms of wardrobe purchases, transportation, extra daycare hours, etc. By abruptly cutting off benefits, going to work actually can increase economic instability. Abrupt cutoff is akin to shaking my hand in congratulations, then socking me in the eye with the other hand.

By assisting workers with a breather between their first several paychecks and the loss of benefits, by allotting for shift work schedules, by retroactive childcare assistance, by expanding Alternative Aid and supporting higher education, it would seem that the State is truly supporting its stated desire to get people to work and encouraging them to develop those brain pathways leading toward self-sustainability on a long-term level.

Thank you for your consideration.