



Maine Equal Justice Partners  
126 Sewall St.  
Augusta, Maine 04330  
(207) 626-7058, x 203

**Testimony of Christine Hastedt, Maine Equal Justice Partners in Opposition to:**

**L.D. 368, "An Act to Integrate the State's General Assistance and Temporary Assistance for Needy Families Programs";**

**L.D. 632, "An Act to Require the State to Administer and Fund the General Assistance Program";**

**L.D. 722, "An Act to Strengthen Penalties for Abuse of General Assistance";**

**L.D. 1035, "An Act to Create a 9-month Time Limit on General Assistance Benefits"; and**

**L.D. 1036, "An Act to Prioritize Use of Available Resources in General Assistance Programs".**

**April 15, 2015**

Good afternoon Senator Brakey, Representative Gattine and members of the Health and Human Services Committee. My name is Christine Hastedt and I work for Maine Equal Justice Partners. We are a civil legal aid organization; we work with and for people with low income seeking solutions to poverty through policy, education and legal representation. Without a doubt those who need help from the General Assistance program are among those who face the deepest levels of poverty and the greatest risk of homelessness and hunger in our State.

I will focus my testimony today on LD 368 and LD 632, but want to be clear that we also oppose LD 722, LD 1035 and LD 1036. With respect to most of the bills that the Committee will consider today, I would remind you that just a little over a year ago a Working Group convened by the Legislature and appointed by the Commissioner spent hundreds of hours examining the General Assistance program to identify savings and consider how to improve the program. I served on the Working Group along with others, including the Maine Municipal Association, municipal welfare directors, and the Department. We came up with a thoughtfully negotiated compromise and our recommendations were largely adopted by the legislature. I did not like every part of that compromise, but it was just that, a

compromise. It is disturbing to see many of the same proposals that were carefully considered, debated and rejected by that group reappear here today.

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One of those is LD 368 that would make families losing TANF benefits as a result of the 60-month limit ineligible for GA. Since the 60 month limit was implemented in June of 2012, more than 3,000 families, including an estimated 6,000 children have lost assistance. I am submitting along with my testimony today testimony from Professor Sandra Butler from the University of Maine who has conducted research on the experience of families affected by the 60-month limit in a two-step longitudinal study. The executive summary of both reports are attached to her testimony.

To summarize, Professor Butler found that nearly one-in-three of the affected families lost their homes following TANF termination; that this group had a high prevalence of disability; few were gainfully employed; and more than half of the parents in these families did not have a high school diploma or GED. Disturbingly, she also found that the extensions designed by the legislature to allow families experiencing certain hardships to receive TANF for longer than 60 months were not effectively or uniformly applied leaving many of them exposed to extreme hardship. In addition, she found that a majority of those interviewed had to turn to their municipal GA program to get help and that most of those received some help. It is hard to imagine what would have happened to these families and their children had GA not been there.

In addition to this research, data provided in response to a Freedom of Access Act request to DHHS in December showed that employment could only be verified for one-third of families that have lost assistance due to time limits since this policy went into effect. This, in combination with data describing their low educational levels makes clear that these families were terminated without the skills or supports needed to find gainful employment. Equally troubling is the fact that only 20% of terminated families received an extension, despite consistent evidence showing a disproportionate incidence of disability and domestic violence in this population—both bases for an extension.

Unlike other bills that we oppose today, it is with regret that we oppose LD 632 that would transfer responsibility for the full funding and administration for the General Assistance program from its current shared partnership between municipalities and the state, to the state alone. We regret having to testify against this bill for three reasons. First, we have a great deal of respect for Senator Saviello and appreciate his good intention in submitting this bill. Second, we are sympathetic to the position of the Maine Municipal Association and recognize that in recent years towns have increasingly assumed

responsibility for helping Maine people meet their most basic needs as cuts at the State level to the TANF, MaineCare and the Food Supplement program have left families without food, prescription medicine and resources to pay the rent. And finally, for decades we have believed that state-administration would be the fairest and most efficient way to administer the General Assistance Program.

But today we oppose this bill for two reasons. First, it would repeal the statutory maximum levels of assistance that must be made available to eligible individuals. Instead assistance levels would be set by rules promulgated by DHHS with no statutory standard to ensure adequacy. Second, this proposal would also leave uncertain several other substantive and procedural provisions in the GA program. Again, these decisions would be left to the discretion of the Department's rulemaking authority. Over the past few years the legislature has rejected several proposals that have come from the Department that would have substantially weakened the program's ability to protect Maine people from homelessness and hunger. In light of this history we have grave concerns about deferring direct statutory authority over this program to administrative rulemaking, even when this proposal would require major substantive rulemaking.

The General Assistance program's responsibility to serve as the safety net of last resort for Maine's poorest residents is too important to expose to uncertainty and risk. If this bill could ensure that the protection that GA provides would not be weakened we would gladly support it. But it does not. So we ask you to vote ought not to pass on LD 632.

There is no doubt that improvements could be made to the General Assistance Program. As you discussed during budget deliberations, GA has become a de facto housing program in the absence of a more appropriate means to fund homeless shelters and a strategy to deal with Maine's affordable housing crisis. Maine ranks 41<sup>st</sup> in the nation—9<sup>th</sup> from the bottom—in access to affordable housing for very low income people. Steps toward solving this problem would be the most effective way to take pressure off the General Assistance Program.

Thank you for the opportunity to provide comments today. I would be glad to answer any questions that you may have.