



Social Services Department  
Sue Charron  
Social Services Director



Testimony of Sue Charron, Social Services Director for the City of Lewiston  
LDs 368; 369; 722; 1035; 1036;  
April 15, 2015

Senator Brakey, Representative Gattine, members of the Health and Human Services Committee. My name is Sue Charron, I am the Social Services Director for the City of Lewiston, and I am providing testimony on LD 368; 369; 722; 1035; 1036;

**Conditional Support for L.D. 368**  
**An Act To Integrate the State's General Assistance and Temporary Assistance for Needy Families Programs**

On April 9, 2015, the Lewiston City Council voted 7-0 to adopt a Resolve to conditionally support LD 368. While supporting the general concept that those who have reached the 60 month TANF limit would be ineligible for GA, the Resolve requests the Legislature consider allowing a continuation of general assistance to those who have a TANF extension application pending and allowing for a transition period for current GA recipients who would no longer qualify for assistance. The resolve is attached.

Since the TANF 60 time limit was implemented in January 2012, the Lewiston GA program has completed intakes on 177 households consisting of 733 persons who are no longer eligible for TANF. Of them, 88 households consisting of 333 persons have received assistance in the amount of \$100,133. That amount would be much higher if it were not for the fact that many of our larger families reside in subsidized housing.

Additional families apply for GA each month as they lose their TANF benefits due to the 60-month time limit. Regardless of whether a family is assisted or denied, the intake is time consuming and the additional work surrounding the eligibility or ineligibility for TANF extensions is even more time intensive. All of the administrative time and expenditures associated with processing the TANF 60 cases result in cost shifts to the municipality.

Per Statute, " A general assistance program provides a specific amount and type of aid for defined needs during a **limited period of time** and is not intended to be a **continuing "grant-in-aid" or categorical" welfare program.**" Enforcing the TANF 60-month time limit forces many families to apply for General Assistance to meet their basic needs for rent, utilities, and personal supplies — an ineffective substitution at best because municipal General Assistance programs do not have the resources that DHHS has in its ASPIRE program. Many of the families who have timed out of TANF after 5 years (and in some cases 10 plus years) do not have the English skills, high school



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diplomas or GEDs, or employment skills to obtain sustainable employment. Our current caseload consists of families who lack the resources and skills to be self-sufficient and, as a result, have been receiving GA since losing their TANF benefits in 2013 and 2014. The GA program has become a continuing "grant-in-aid" program in order to meet the long term needs of these families, and that is not the intent of the program.

**Neither for nor Against L.D. 369**

**An Act To Align Municipal General Assistance Programs with the Immigration Status Policies of the Department of Health and Human Services**

The City of Lewiston continues to be impacted by applicants who are ineligible for State or Federal benefits due to their immigration status. There is an increase in GA applications from Legal Permanent Residents residing in the U.S. for less than five years. Asylum seekers continue to arrive in Lewiston and expenditures for this population continue to increase. It can take several years for an individual's asylum application to be acted upon, and it is only when an application is approved that the individual qualifies for federal benefits. The following chart shows the increasing trend in asylum seeker applications for General Assistance:

FY	New Asylum Seeker Intakes (Cases)	Asylum Seeker Individuals Assisted	Amount expended
FY 2010	31	73	\$122,617
FY 2014	70	160	\$152,470
FY2015 (6 months)	58	185	\$170,523

Asylum seekers come to the United States in search of refuge from persecution in their homeland. They are ineligible for work permits until 180 days have elapsed from the date that U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services (USCIS) acknowledges receipt of their asylum application (I-589). In addition, they are ineligible for any other federal benefit until actually granted asylum. In practice, many asylum seekers must wait much longer than 180 days to be allowed to seek employment.

For a significant majority of asylum seekers, any delay in the employment authorization process not only serves as a barrier to economic self-sufficiency but places the economic burden of supporting the individual and/or a family directly onto the shoulders of the community.

The 180-day wait period proves to be especially difficult to comprehend since many of the recent arrivals are educated and work ready. Several of these general assistance



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recipients have become employed within a very short time of receiving their work document and are able to support themselves and their families without municipal funds.

The City of Lewiston requests that the State Legislature and State Administration engage in conversations with Maine's Federal Delegation to enact changes to the immigration laws regarding the timely processing of asylum applications and work documents.

**Support L.D. 722**

**An Act To Strengthen Penalties for Abuse of General Assistance**

Current law stipulates that a 120-day disqualification be applied to applicants who commit fraud. Expanding the fraud penalty to include a reimbursement provision holds the disqualified applicants accountable and adds accountability to the GA program. Statewide, there are GA applicants who are disqualified for fraud for 120 days and reapply on the 121<sup>st</sup> day. During the 120-day period, they have done nothing to better their situation. The DHHS fraud penalties are much more stringent than the GA penalties, and this expansion is a step in the right direction.

**Support L.D. 1035**

**An Act To Create a 9-month Time Limit on General Assistance Benefits**

In order to continue receiving SNAP benefits, able-bodied persons without dependents are now required to volunteer or work for a certain number of hours each month based on the amount of SNAP that they are eligible to receive. A number of these able-bodied persons have not complied with the requirements and are applying for GA to essentially replace their SNAP benefits.

GA cannot include the SNAP benefits as a resource when determining eligibility; so, if there is a deficit and the person meets all of the GA eligibility requirements, the person can be granted food assistance. This is causing an increase in GA expenditures, and these expenditures will only increase as more individuals lose their SNAP benefits. Implementing a time limit, whether it be the time limit proposed in this bill or an alternative time limit, for able-bodied persons without dependents to receive GA holds the client accountable and adds accountability into the program.

**Support (L.D. 1036**

**An Act To Prioritize Use of Available Resources in General Assistance Programs**

Current law states that an applicant who refuses to utilize potential resources without just cause, after receiving a written 7-day notice, is disqualified from receiving assistance until the applicant has made a good faith effort to secure the resource. The law also



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states that an applicant who forfeits receipt of or causes reduction in benefits from another public assistance program because of fraud, misrepresentation, or a knowing or intentional violation of program rules or a refusal to comply with program rules without just cause is not eligible to receive general assistance to replace the forfeited assistance for the duration of the forfeiture. However, the law does not address available resources. This bill would align the language for potential and available resources.

If a person abandons or causes a reduction in benefits from an available resource that would have eliminated the need for GA, a disqualification period should be applied. This bill increases client accountability and adds accountability to the GA program.