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## **Testimony in Opposition to LD 1443, "An Act to Make Convicted Drug Felons Ineligible for TANF Assistance"**

**May 3, 2013**

Good afternoon Senator Craven and Representative Farnsworth and members of the Joint Standing Committee on Health and Human Services. My name is Robyn Merrill and I work for Maine Equal Justice Partners. I am speaking today on behalf of the Maine Association of Interdependent Neighborhoods (MAIN) in opposition to LD 1443, "An Act to Make Convicted Drug Felons Ineligible for TANF Assistance." MAIN is a statewide coalition working to improve economic security for people with low income.

LD 1443 would make anyone with a prior drug-related felony conviction ineligible for the Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) program. In 2009, with broad bipartisan support, the Legislature opted not to bar parents with a prior drug-related felony conviction from accessing TANF. Maine is not alone in opting out of the federal ban, as 37 states and the District of Columbia have passed similar legislation totally or partially restoring TANF benefits to this group of individuals, including all of the New England states.

Maine opted to make TANF potentially available to women with past drug-related convictions because categorically closing the door on them was harsh and posed extreme harm to the entire family, including young children. Studies indicate that the majority of women with drug convictions were incarcerated on charges involving low levels of substances designed for personal use, not distribution.<sup>1</sup> Most of these women have struggled with use and addiction, often in response to significant experiences with abuse and victimization, but rarely have access to treatment to address their issues. These women often have relatively limited educational and vocational training and face a variety of issues such as homelessness, mental health issues, and poverty.

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<sup>1</sup> [http://www.sagepub.com/upm-data/44337\\_10\\_\(final\).pdf](http://www.sagepub.com/upm-data/44337_10_(final).pdf)

Women who make the transition from prison or jail back to their communities must achieve stability in their lives. Yet, many factors do not make this easy. Numerous studies have shown that having a criminal record creates a significant barrier to employment. Prior convictions generally limit opportunities for many ex-offenders to the low wage/low skill job market where employers are generally not able to be as selective about a criminal record.

This bar on assistance would jeopardize the very efforts toward sustainable and safe housing, education, and drug treatment that are needed in order for women to successfully transition from prison. Without access to the basic safety net that TANF provides, these families will face high levels of distress, including hunger and homelessness. Those affected by this ban would lose more than access to TANF cash assistance—they would also lose access to other vital services provided through the ASPIRE Program, including child-care, education, and other activities designed to help them find and maintain employment.

These types of limits not only affect the women who are in the greatest need of services but their children as well, who will suffer physically, mentally, and emotionally from these economic struggles. Passage of this legislation will not only create greater economic insecurity for these families, but it will also deprive them of the tools they need to improve their lives. We strongly oppose passage of LD 1443. I would be glad to answer any questions you may have.