



THE EPISCOPAL CHURCH IN MAINE

Loring House

143 State Street Portland, ME 04101-3701

207-772-1953

www.episcopalmaine.org

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Testimony in Opposition to LD 36, 219 & 220

My name is John Hennessy and I am the Director of the Maine Episcopal Network for Justice. The Episcopal Church adopts positions on a range of issues related to justice and peace through its triennial General Convention. The Church and its members then live out these the stated position at the local congregational and diocesan levels as well as by sharing such positions in the public square. It is in that capacity that the Maine Episcopal Network for Justice offers this testimony today. We are united in our understanding that to be a people rooted in mission, we must work tirelessly for justice.

While we affirm the support for and improvement of state programs to reduce the numbers of those living in poverty, to support workers' efforts to achieve self-sufficiency, and to ensure continuing benefits for those who require a safety net to care for their families, we oppose the four bills being discussed today. Today we offer testimony to support policies that serve our most vulnerable Maine neighbors.

LD 10 - An Act To Build Greater Accountability into the General Assistance Program by Increasing the Penalty for Falsely Representing Information on an Application for General Assistance

As we understand it, according to current law, when a GA recipient is found to have deliberately lied to a city or town in order to get GA, they can be charged with a Class E crime AND they would be required to pay back the assistance they had received AND be disqualified from receiving GA again until they repay or after 120 days has passed, whichever takes longer.

LD 10 proposes to change the disqualification period from four months (120 days) to two full years (24 months). We feel this is overly punitive. If someone needs GA, they are in dire straits and in a desperate situation. The repayment requirement and four month waiting period is already a penalty.

The effect of this proposed legislation would be to deny people who need help with access to basic necessities for at least two years, and in many cases longer. Since GA is the assistance program of last resort, most would have no other options for meeting their basic needs and would become homeless.

LD 36 - An Act to Create a 9-month Time Limit on Certain General Assistance Programs for Certain Persons

This bill would limit GA to 9 months in a five year period. We believe this arbitrary cap will lead to more homelessness and hunger in Maine communities.

The limit applies to those who are “capable of working”, but we see it provides no definition of what this means; this is subject to opinion, abuse and misinterpretation. We understand people often get GA while they are waiting for a disability determination from Social Security, which can take well over nine months – even years – to complete. During that time they have not yet been determined “disabled” but most are unable to work.

Studies indicate most people get GA for a short period of time. The great majority of GA recipients need assistance for well less than 9 months; only a small minority needs it for longer. For those who need it for longer, there are often good, valid reasons.

A University of New England (UNE) study of those who need GA for longer periods shows that without GA:

- ☐ 92% said they would have NO place to live;
- ☐ Almost 2/3rds (62%) would not have the medicine they need; and
- ☐ Nearly 60% would not have enough to eat.

This restriction is particularly dangerous given the complex array of physical, psychological, or social problems recipients face. Nearly half of the UNE survey respondents had a serious mental or physical health problem.

The majority of these individuals face challenges that have been chronic and lifelong, arising in many cases from traumatic childhood experience— these individuals who needed GA for longer ranked 160% higher than the mainstream population in the level of Adverse Childhood Experiences they suffered.

LD 36 puts people with serious mental health conditions at risk of homelessness. Nearly 85% of GA is provided for housing help. Without this help many would become homeless.

If people need GA for longer periods and ARE able to work the municipality can require them to work for their benefits right now—they can require them to do any number of needed jobs within their communities. If they refuse, they will lose all help.

There is a well-established link between homelessness and other more costly services including expensive emergency and inpatient mental health care; police contacts and shelter stays.

LD 219 - An Act To Prioritize Use of Available Resources in General Assistance Programs

This bill may seem to be requiring something entirely reasonable – that GA applicants use other available resources before receiving GA. But this is already required by law:

- ❑ The law ALREADY requires people receiving General Assistance to apply for any other help available to them in order to remain eligible for GA.
- ❑ The law ALREADY disqualifies people from GA if they come to GA after losing any other public benefit because they didn't follow the rules.

What this bill actually does is add a harsh penalty to this requirement.

Right now, someone who does not use a potential resource without 'just cause' is disqualified from receiving assistance until they make a good faith effort to secure the resource. This bill adds a new provision by also barring anyone in this situation from receiving GA for 120 days, regardless of whether or not they have since made a good faith effort to use all available resources.

Currently, if someone runs afoul of these rules, they are very likely doing so without knowing that these rules even exist. Accordingly, they are able to make up for the mistake rather quickly. This would change that by barring them access to what is likely desperately needed assistance for about four months.

This bill includes a list of 'just causes' for not using available resources, but the list doesn't take into account any number of reasons why someone might refuse an available resource. For example:

- ❑ Domestic violence. A person who is a victim of domestic violence may move from a subsidized apartment to get away from an abusive relationship.
- ❑ Wellbeing of children. You and your kids are living with a family member in crowded conditions and that family member took out their frustration by constantly punishing your children for crying or exhibiting other stress-inducing behaviors.
- ❑ Similarly, a parent may decide to give up a resource and move to a different community so that their children can live in a safer neighborhood.
- ❑ Divorce. Who is to judge whether someone's decision to leave their spouse is or is not a "just cause." Divorce is a serious decision and none of us would want someone second guessing our own decision about something that personal and important.

LD 220 - An Act To Align Time Limits in the Municipal General Assistance Program and Temporary Assistance for Needy Families Program

If LD 220 is enacted, thousands of Maine children and their families would be left without access to the basic safety net that GA provides—a safety net that prevents them from suffering from homelessness and hunger.

TANF is, by definition, a program for families with children—often very young children. Thousands of Maine's poorest children would be at risk if this bill passes.

While some claim that the TANF 60-month time limit is a success pointing to the more than 9,000 families that have so far left the rolls, that claim ignores the real outcomes of this policy. By that measure it is far from a success.

We know that many of these families losing TANF were poorly prepared for work. For instance, consider these findings from past research on TANF parents by a professor at the University of Maine:

- ☐ More than half of the surveyed parents who left TANF because of the 60- month time limit did not have a GED or high school diploma.
- ☐ A DHHS review showed that only one-third of these families were working after losing TANF.
- ☐ Nearly 90% of families surveyed that reached the TANF 60-month limit had a work-limiting disability or a child with a disability.
- ☐ Given these facts, it is no surprise that one-in-three families lost their homes when they lost TANF.
- ☐ GA has been a lifeline—preventing homelessness and hunger for many of these families.

It is hard to imagine what would have happened to these families and their children had GA not been there. TANF must be improved to provide parents greater opportunity to become employed and leave assistance behind. Until that goal is reached, General Assistance must be available to keep a roof over children's heads throughout the state.

As a representative of one organization that provides resources, food and essentials to an already overwhelming number of people throughout the state, the last thing we need is public policy that promises to create more poor people, more hungry people and more homeless people.

Please vote no on these proposals.

Thank you.