

Maine Women's Lobby

THE VOICE OF MAINE WOMEN

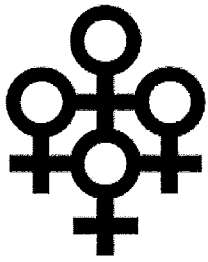
Testimony of Danna Hayes in Support of LD 1268 and in Opposition to LDs 452, ~~1079~~, 1144 and 1375.

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Senator Brakey, Representative Gattine, and distinguished members of the Joint Standing Committee on Health and Human Services. I am Danna Hayes, Director of Public Policy for the Maine Women's Lobby. We work to advance policies that improve the economic, social and political status of Maine's 678,000 women and girls. I am here today in support of LD 1268, and opposition LDs 452, 1079, 1144 and 1375.

The vast majority of the Mainers using the Temporary Aid for Needy Families program (TANF) are women. The program is only available to families with children. We know that a majority of impoverished families with young children live in families headed by single mothers.¹ These are families who often struggle with multiple barriers to gainful employment, including higher than average rates of domestic violence, lack of access to child care, transportation, disability or lack of education. Acknowledging these difficult realities that keep families trapped in poverty, the 125th legislature created a process through which TANF recipients can be thoroughly screened and connected with resources that can permanently address ongoing barriers to work. Implementing an upfront work search requirement subverts this entire process, by forcing people to search for work before they can address limitations that would enable them to obtain and maintain employment. We suspect this requirement will dissuade many eligible recipients who know they cannot sustain employment from applying for assistance at all, and will result in many more being excluded from receiving the meaningful help with employment barriers that truly help people leave poverty.

We also must oppose limitations on use of benefits to certain states. The presumption behind this limitation is that either that people in poverty should not be using their assistance for vacations and enjoyment or that they do not truly live in Maine and therefore should not be receiving this assistance. Like the rest of us, families in poverty occasionally have to visit other states for reasons other than for fun. They attend funerals, care for sick or aging family members, or attend job interviews. If there is genuine concern that a family does not live in Maine because their EBT cards are being used elsewhere for an extended period of time, the Department already has the tools it needs to address this. Punishing others who have completely appropriate and necessary reasons for using benefits for a short period of time in another state is the wrong way to target any actual abuse and does nothing to move people out of poverty. In the same vein, we are very concerned about limitations on cash withdrawals, which can be used for rent, utility bills, child care and transportation transactions that do not take EBT cards. This dangerous proposal subverts the very reason the benefits are provided in the first place, which is to cover



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expenses such as these. Without widespread acceptance of EBT cards by private landlords, child care providers and utility companies, among many others, it is clear that families would be prohibited from using their benefits to keep themselves afloat.

Fortunately, we know what actually moves people off public assistance in a meaningful and permanent way. LD 1268 addresses many of the issues that keep families trapped in poverty. Removing the gross-income test and better addressing the efforts of two-parent households truly rewards movement away from public assistance by easing a family off assistance instead of pulling the rug out from under them just as they are getting back on their feet. We are also thrilled about the consideration of the delays in receiving assistance with child care into the bill, which we know is often a barrier to employment for women, especially. The wait to obtain approval for child care after getting a job offer often means either racking up incredible debt with care providers because the benefit does not apply retroactively, or it means passing up gainful employment until funds are made available. Neither of these unintended outcomes serves our shared goal of helping families move off of assistance and into self-sufficiency.

On the whole, LD 1268 presents an opportunity to reduce TANF caseloads through meaningful and purposeful support, whereas we believe the other bills we are discussing will reduce caseloads through punitive measures without ever addressing the underlying causes of poverty. In the end, it will be the children of these families who will suffer the most from the effects of the decisions made here.

ⁱ U.S. Census Bureau, 2006-2010 American Community Survey