



May 12, 2015

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Testimony in Opposition to LDs 452, 1097, 1144, 1375
and in Support of LD 1268

Good afternoon Senator Brakey, Representative Gattine, and members of the Joint Standing Committee on Health and Human Services. My name is Jeff Vane and I am an advocate with Homeless Voices for Justice. I am here today to testify in opposition to LDs 452, 1097, 1144, and 1375, and in support of LD 1268.

PROJECT STAFF:

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Homeless Voices for Justice is a grassroots group that works for social change on behalf of people who are experiencing homelessness and poverty. We advocate for solutions to issues that impact Maine's most vulnerable individuals and communities, and aim to influence policies that will improve the lives of every man, woman, and child living in poverty.

Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) provides assistance for families with young children – families who are living in poverty and struggling to meet their basic needs. TANF provides hope for these families and children in this time of crisis.

Unfortunately, many of the bills before you today would create barriers for families in need of assistance. LD 452 would require people to apply for jobs before they can even qualify for services. Many of these families have no access to child care or transportation, making it nearly impossible to meet this requirement. At the same time, families in need of child care and transportation would not be able to accept the jobs they do apply for. Outside of TANF, there are no other programs to help with these things.

LD 1097 would ban EBT use outside of Maine. This is a terrible idea. All families, including those who receive public assistance, should have the freedom to travel to other states. Like you, families who receive TANF should be able to travel to Massachusetts, Vermont, or any other state to visit or care for family or friends, mourn the loss of a loved one, or get needed medical care. And like you, these families should be able to access the resources and benefits approved to them wherever they are.

LD 1144 would place further restrictions on EBT use, and would harm children, seniors, and people with disabilities. Placing harsh penalties on those suspected of misusing their benefits is dangerous as it could lead to families no longer being able to provide food or housing for themselves. It would pit communities against each other, encouraging neighbors to turn people in who they believe used TANF benefits for certain purchases. They likely don't know these families' circumstances, or whether they used hard-earned wages to pay for things rather than cash from their TANF benefit.

Homeless Voices for Justice

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The Governor's bill, LD 1375, is even more frightening. This bill not only includes the proposals I've already mentioned, but takes these ideas further and creates even more hurdles for struggling families to overcome. For example, this bill would restrict families from withdrawing more than 15% of their monthly benefit amount. Many people who receive TANF need to pay rent with cash from their TANF benefit. However, under this bill, they would no longer be able to do that. You can't pay rent with an EBT card. If this bill passes, families and children will be left homeless.

Unlike the bills previous I've mentioned, LD 1268 actually proposes ideas that will help lift people out of poverty. One of the things this bill does is eliminate the "welfare cliff," meaning families will not be completely cut off from benefits once they start working. This is the way it should be, as people who start working still need some assistance as they become more independent. Another good thing about this bill is that it identifies transportation as a key factor in obtaining employment. Having access to reliable transportation will allow families to get to and from their jobs, increasing the chance that they will keep that job and, in turn, their independence. The overall lack of affordable and reliable transportation has proven to be a huge barrier for people living in poverty, so we're grateful to see this as a priority in this bill. It is long overdue.

On behalf of myself and Homeless Voices for Justice, I strongly urge you to oppose the following bills: LD 452, LD 1097, LD 1144, and LD 1375, and support LD 1268. Instead of introducing bills that will push people deeper into poverty, we should be coming up with solutions to help lift people out of poverty.

Thank you.