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Testimony of Rep. James Gillway (R-Searsport)

In Support Of

LD 1842, "An Act To Amend the Laws Governing the Temporary Assistance for Needy Families Program"

Senator Craven, Representative Farnsworth, and members of the Health and Human Services Committee. My name is James Gillway, and I am proud to represent District 41, which includes Frankfort, Orland, Prospect, Searsport, Stockton Springs, and Verona Island.

I am pleased to be here today as the sponsor of LD 1842, "An Act To Amend the Laws Governing the Temporary Assistance for Needy Families Program."

In the past few years, Maine has racked up over \$13 million in federal penalties for our noncompliance in the Temporary Assistance for Needy Families, or TANF, program. We face the fines because only about 10 percent of two-adult households receiving TANF are meeting the work requirement.

The work requirement means that TANF recipients are required to work or participate in a work search or training program through the ASPIRE program.

Our state's noncompliance is in large part due to the fact that Maine has built up an apparatus of exceptions to the work search requirement. There are even exceptions for "Other Good Cause," which is basically a catch-all exception. All of these exceptions are creatures of state statute, above and beyond what federal law allows for.

The TANF program was created as a part of the comprehensive federal welfare reform bill signed into law by President Bill Clinton. It was designed to move people from welfare to work. The law encouraged states to adopt a five-year cap on TANF benefits, and 43 of them ultimately did. Maine was one of only seven states to make these "temporary" benefits limitless and without a lifetime cap.

We finally changed that in 2011. This is another attempt to put Maine in line with federal expectations and national norms when it comes to welfare. We can no longer afford to be an

outlier welfare state. We rank second in the nation for welfare spending as a share of overall state spending, and that is unsustainable.

Even worse than the numbers and facts is the culture of dependency we have created. I hear about it all the time when I speak with my friends, neighbors, and constituents. They are tired of working longer hours and extra jobs only to see their neighbors overuse the system.

I see this and other welfare reform measures as a lifeline to the truly needy Mainers who are using the programs in good faith. Not only will reform free up funds for those who truly need the help, but it will begin to alleviate the frustration that taxpayers feel with our welfare system. If Mainers finally say “enough” to our welfare programs as a whole, that will only hurt those who rely on them.

That’s why I encourage this committee to come together on a bipartisan basis and work to reform our welfare system. The taxpayers will thank you, Maine’s truly needy will thank you, and we can take a significant step in breaking a cycle of intergenerational welfare dependency.

The folks behind me who work in this area of expertise are here to talk about the nuances of this piece of legislation. I probably won’t be very good at answering the technical questions about the State administration of TANF. I am here to present a different view. I am the Town Manager for the Town of Searsport and I have provided workplaces for several TANF recipients over the past nine years. I want to state that I welcome the help. As we all know, the revenue for all of our towns and cities has been shrinking for many years.

Bringing on TANF workers has really helped my organization. I want to encourage other towns, cities and non-profit organizations to offer positions for recipients. The people who have worked for me have been bright, eager, intelligent, mostly young individuals. Most of the participants have moved on to full time employment in the area and I have written many letters of recommendation for them.

Thank you, and with that, I would be happy to take any questions from the committee.