

Testimony of Francine Garland Stark

Speaking in opposition to

LD 33 "An Act to Adjust the Lifetime Limit for the Receipt of TANF Benefits;"

LD 477 "An Act to Prevent Long-term Welfare Dependency;"

LD 1017 "An Act to Strengthen Work Participation in the TANF Program;"

LD 1052 "An Act to Allow Drug Testing Prior to Providing Welfare Benefits;" and

LD 1075 "An Act to Eliminate Drug Use Among Welfare Recipients."

Before the Committee on Health and Human Services

Monday, April 24, 2017

Senator Brakey, Representative Hymanson and members of the Committee on Health and Human Services, my name is Francine Garland Stark, and I live in Surry, Maine. I am speaking today on behalf of the Maine Coalition to End Domestic Violence in opposition to LD 33, LD 477, LD 1017, LD 1052, and LD 1075.

In 2016, the Domestic Violence Resource Centers that comprise the Maine Coalition to End Domestic Violence provided services for more than 12,000 adult victims of domestic abuse and violence, sheltering 428 adults and 314 children, providing legal services for more than 3600 people, and providing specialized support for more than 2,000 families in the child welfare system. Through 24 hour hotlines, outreach offices, shelters, and transitional housing sites, advocates help Maine's victims of domestic abuse and violence move from circumstances of terror and hopelessness to circumstances of possibility with plans to increase their safety, protect and nurture their children, and establish economically sustainable and stable lives.

There are many elements of these bills that would be devastating for people affected by domestic abuse and violence, and I am concerned about the limitations of "good cause" protections as they are described in LD 33 and LD 1017. While the "good cause exemption" would benefit a modest number of domestic violence survivors, I believe that far more would fall outside the intent of the "good cause" exemption for these reasons:

1. The language in the proposal reflects a broad range of ways in which domestic violence may impact survivors, yet it requires "verifiable evidence of domestic violence," which is often not available.
 - Most victims of domestic abuse and violence do not report their experience of abuse to authorities, and while many contact domestic violence resource centers, many tell no one or confide solely in a trusted friend or family member.
 - Much of what constitutes domestic abuse and violence is not against the law and is difficult to demonstrate as abusive; it is the daily, coercive, controlling tactics the perpetrator uses to maintain their position of power of the household.
 - Some victims of domestic violence may hit the lifetime limit for receiving TANF due to a past relationship and find themselves years later escaping another abusive partner. It is unclear from the bill's language whether a "good cause" exemption would apply in such a case.

2. Some victims of domestic abuse and violence have felony drug convictions.
 - Advocates often help victims of domestic violence whose abuser coerced them into using illegal drugs and becoming an accessory to the perpetrator's drug dealing activities. The domestic violence resource centers run support and education groups in Maine's jails and prisons, and regardless of what criminal behavior resulted in their incarceration, women in Maine's correctional system overwhelmingly report a history of domestic and sexual violence. Yet these victims and their children would be ineligible for SNAP and TANF as they try to reestablish themselves in the community and start lives.
3. Exempting people only for a current, verifiable crisis of domestic violence fails to take into account the trauma of witnessing domestic violence as a child or growing into adulthood in a context of chaos created by perpetrators of domestic violence.
 - According to a report prepared by the Maine Medical Center Dept. of Vocational Services, 2,824 of the 4,613 people assessed for job readiness over a 2.25-year period had experienced abuse: 61%. Of these, 91% had experienced verbal abuse, 81% physical, 48% sexual. 19% reported that it affected their ability to work.

In LD 477, the requirement that the *applicant for alternative aid who is seeking to obtain employment to participate in job search activities consistent with the job search activities for participants of the ASPIRE-TANF program* does not appear to include a "good cause" exemption. Those in the midst of escaping abuse and establishing new lives who are seeking Alternative Aid have been managing without TANF - yet find themselves in need. My experience of survivors escaping domestic violence is that they are simultaneously engaged in many kinds of help seeking, trying to keep their children feeling secure and attended while figuring out the safest way to recover from whatever kind of retribution the perpetrator of domestic violence has leveled against them for their having left the perpetrator. A requirement that they seek work prior to receiving short-term, critical assistance would delay support for this vulnerable family and affirm what perpetrators of domestic violence so frequently say to their victims: You can't survive without me. You are worthless. You will never make it on your own.

I ask that the committee vote against these bills that further restrict assistance for Maine's families living in poverty. While we may protect a few of those in need through exemptions in the short term, the larger impact will be to leave too many struggling to survive rather than achieving sustainable lives. While the proposed sanctions and limitations are intended to influence and/or punish adults for their behavior, the impact of these dangerous policies would be to punish children for having had the misfortune to be born into poverty and strife, abandoned by their communities as well when their parents – for whatever reasons – are eking out their living on the edge of survival.