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Testimony of Christine Hastedt, Maine Equal Justice Partners April 24, 2017

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; and LD 1017, An Act to Strengthen Work Participation in the Temporary Assistance for Needy Families Program

Senator Brakey, Representative Hymanson, and members of the Joint Standing Committee on Health and Human Services, my name is Christine Hastedt and I work for Maine Equal Justice. Maine Equal Justice is a legal services organization working with and for people with low income in seeking solutions to poverty through policy, education and legal representation. I am speaking today in *opposition* to LD's 33, 477, and 1017.

In my previous testimony today, I urged you to test each bill you hear today against the common definition of the word "reform"—that is, would the policies that these bills promote really make the kind of change that will improve the lives of poor children and families or not?

In the case of LD's 33, 477, and 1017 we believe that the answer is a resounding "no".

LD 33 takes us down the path that only a distinct minority of states—14—have gone by setting less than a 60-month lifetime limit on TANF assistance. Reform that will really help families leave poverty behind does not simply end assistance at some arbitrary point in time whether or not a family is ready and able to rely on sustainable employment to make ends meet. Instead we need to do a better job from day one of getting people the tools they need to find and keep a job that will help them leave poverty behind.

Over half of the people who lost TANF due to time limits in 2012 lacked a high school degree or its equivalent. Research done by a scholar from the University of Maine shows that most of these families did not move from welfare to work—to the contrary, life simply got harder as kids, and so

did their future prospects. Many of these families went without basics like a home or enough food to eat.¹

LD 477 would impose a requirement to the Alternative Aid program that is incompatible with the very purpose of this program which is to provide prompt, short-term relief to families experiencing a crisis that threatens their ability to get or keep a job. These crises typically involve a broken-down car, a disrupted child care arrangement or a housing crisis. When this kind of crisis prevents a parent from being able to get to work, it stands to reason that the same crisis would prevent them from participating in a work search program. Moreover, Alternative Aid is not ongoing assistance; once the need is addressed the family will no longer receive assistance, but will be able to return to their job or continue looking for work as they did before the crisis hit.

LD 1017 is another proposal that has been defeated numerous times in the past. Eliminating all “good cause” protections but domestic violence would put Maine in the company of only three other states that impose such extreme measures as sanctioning a family that is unable to comply with program rules through no fault of its own. An extensive body of research shows that those sanctioned for failing to comply with program requirements have disproportionate barriers to employment including mental health issues, physical disabilities, and low educational levels.² Research also finds that sanctioned families are one-third less likely to obtain employment after leaving TANF than non-sanctioned TANF leavers.³

In summary, I’d ask you keep in mind three important facts as you consider these proposals.

¹ <http://www.mejp.org/content/tanf-time-limits-one-year-later>

² Meyers, Marcia, Shannon Harper, Marieka Klawitter, and Taryn Lindhorst (2006). Review of Research on TANF Sanctions: Report to Washington State WorkFirst SubCabinet.

³ Cook, John T.; Deborah A. Frank; Carol Berkowitz; Maureen M. Black; Patrick H. Casey; Diana B. Cutts; Alan F. Meyers; Nieves Zaldivar; Anne Skalicky; Suzette Levenson; and Tim Heeren. (2002). “Welfare Reform and the Health of Young Children: A Sentinel Survey of 6 US Cities.” *Archives of Pediatrics Adolescent Medicine*. Vol. 156. <http://www.childrenshealthwatch.org/publication/welfare-reform-and-the-health-of-young-children/>

First, when a family loses TANF cash assistance whether through sanction or the imposition of arbitrary time limits, they also lose access to employment, education and training opportunities available through the ASPIRE Program, along with critical work supports like child care and transportation. These are the services most likely to help families reach the goal of self-sustaining employment. Policy should be designed to promote these services, not deny them.

Second, nearly three-quarters (72%) of Maine's TANF recipients are children.⁴ These children are mostly quite young—more than half (56%) of TANF families include a child under 6.⁵ The well-being of these children hangs in the balance as decisions are made about TANF policy. Since 2011, the percentage of Maine children living in deep poverty—less than \$800 a month for a family of 3—has increased at a rate *8 times* greater than the national average.⁶ Today, TANF provides help to only 22% of Maine children living in poverty as compared to 47% just 5 years ago.⁷ This evidence alone, shows that it is time to change direction.

Finally, TANF families understand work; the great majority have worked, and want to work. Two recent reports by the Maine Medical Center Department of Vocational Services that assessed approximately 5,000 TANF parents throughout the state between December 2013 and July 2016⁸ found that 96% of those assessed have worked in the past and more than three-quarters of those unemployed expressed a “strong or urgent need” to change their *employment* status with more than half (53%) expressing a “strong or urgent need” to change their *educational* status.

⁴ <https://www.acf.hhs.gov/ofa/programs/tanf/data-reports>

⁵ https://www.acf.hhs.gov/sites/default/files/ofa/characteristics_and_financial_circumstances_of_tanf_recipients.pdf

⁶ 2015 American Community Survey data analysis by Maine Center for Economic Policy

⁷ <http://datacenter.kidscount.org/data/tables/1564-children-receiving-tanf?loc=21&loct=5#detailed/5/3284-3299/false/869,36,868,867,133/any/12826,3335>.
<http://datacenter.kidscount.org/data/tables/1562-children-in-poverty?loc=21&loct=5#detailed/5/3284-3299/false/573,869,36,868,867/any/11725,3331>. Maine DHHS Office of Family Independence data compiled for 2015 <http://www.maine.gov/dhhs/ofir/reports/2015/index.html>

⁸ “AVAP: What did we Find Out?”; Christine McKenzie, M. ED, CRC; Director, Department of Vocational Services, Clinical Professor Psychiatry Tufts University School of Medicine; Maine Medicaid Center; June, 2016.

To summarize, some may equate caseload reduction with "success" in evaluating reform. But, good policy-making requires more than that. It requires a rigorous examination of whether or not families' lives have actually improved as a result of programs and policies; whether parents have gotten good jobs, become truly independent and left poverty behind. For all these reasons, we urge you to reject LD's 33, 477 and 1017.

Thank you for the opportunity speak with you today.