

Testimony of Jennifer Farrington
In Opposition to LD 368 - An Act To Integrate the State's General Assistance and Temporary
Assistance for Needy Families Programs
April 15, 2015

Good afternoon, Senator Brakey, Representative Gattine, and members of the Joint Standing Committee on Health and Human Services. My name is Jennifer Farrington and I live in West Gardiner with my partner, Rick, and our two children ages 8 and 16. I'm here today because I'm really worried about the proposal to prohibit families who have used TANF for 60 months or more from receiving help from the General Assistance program.

Rick used to work for Blue Rock Industries as a diesel mechanic and driver. He was a valued worker, was paid well, and put in an incredible amount of overtime. He loved working on and driving the big paving machines and was quickly hired by Blue Rock in Auburn when the Blue Rock plant in Leeds closed down. Unfortunately, the Auburn plant closed as well a few years later. It didn't take him long to find another diesel mechanic job after Blue Rock Auburn closed and although the pay was much lower, we mostly managed to get by. However, when he got laid off that job and was unable to find employment, we ended up having to rely on TANF. I was able to get my CNA license while on TANF and I went to work. The economy was bad but Rick found work from time to time and we found ourselves on and off TANF as jobs came and went. I continued to get training and added licenses for CRMA and PSS in hopes of increasing my employability and wages. Between the two of us we managed to keep our heads above water until Rick got sick.

He has been diagnosed with mixed connective tissue disease and Rheumatoid arthritis. He has the joints of a 90 year old man and some days cannot even get out of a chair by himself or walk across the room. Because he's so severely disabled, he's been approved for a few hours a week of in-home care to help him with activities of daily living. And because I have my PSS license, I am able to provide that care to him. Unfortunately, he needs much more care than he's been approved for, so even if I could find outside work, I couldn't commit to a regular schedule as I never know when he's going to have a particularly bad day and need me to be home with him. These days are unfortunately more often than not.

It's been almost two years since he applied for SSDI. During that time we've been relying on TANF and we hit our 60th month. And even though we've been approved now for our second extension due to Rick needing me in the home to care for him, we worry every month about whether the extension will continue. It has been very difficult to get these extensions. I was denied my second extension even though Rick's health had actually worsened. This took time and made us all extremely anxious. My only comfort was knowing that if all else failed, the town would help us with rent and my family wouldn't become homeless. Finally after getting legal help my TANF extension was granted.

We live very frugally but one month this winter, I had to turn to General Assistance for help with some oil to heat our home. I don't know what we would have done if that help had not been available, which it wouldn't have been if this bill had been in place.

We're waiting now for a hearing to be scheduled for Rick's SSDI appeal. Once that is approved, and I can't imagine that it won't be, we will be able to get by without TANF and hopefully without General Assistance. However, I can't guarantee that an emergency might not arise that would cause us to need help from the town on occasion. It's the last ditch safety net available to families in Maine, and to withhold that safety net from us and others in our situation, just because we've faced years of a bad economy and illness just seems cruel.

Please do not approve this proposal. Allow the towns to decide who is eligible and who isn't. Believe me, they are not over generous with their assistance. And a small amount of assistance at a critical time can make a world of difference.

Thank you for listening to my comments.