



Preble Street

Turning Hunger and Homelessness into Opportunity and Hope

Florence House

Logan Place

Veterans Housing Services

Maine Hunger Initiative

Advocacy

Food Programs

Clinical Intervention Program

Anti-Trafficking Coalition

First Place

Teen Center

Joe Kreisler Teen Shelter

Resource Center

MMC-Preble Street Learning

Collaborative

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April 10, 2017

Good Morning Senator Brakey, Representative Hymanson and members of the Joint Standing Committee on Health and Human Services. My name is Thomas Ptacek and I am here today on behalf of Preble Street to testify in strong opposition to LD 10, 36, 219, and 220.

I am a veteran of the U.S. Navy. I myself experienced homelessness and slept on a mat at the shelter for the entire year of 2008. I became an advocate with Homeless Voices for Justice for 3 years and now have been working full time at Preble Street for 3 years.

The mission of Preble Street is to provide accessible barrier-free services to empower people experiencing problems with homelessness, housing, hunger, and poverty, and to advocate for solutions to these problems.

Make no mistake about it, at Preble Street we see successes every day; however, we are also seeing an alarming need. We see it every day in our overcrowded day shelter. Preble Street serves 1,200 soup kitchen meals every day, but shouldn't have to. People should be able to eat in their own homes, with meals they've prepared themselves. With General Assistance, thousands of Maine people across the state can do just that.

In a state where fully one third of our workforce does not make a livable wage, genuine reform efforts should focus on the underlying problems, the lack of affordable housing and jobs that pay that livable wage, instead of simply punishing struggling Mainers and making it more likely that they end up on the streets. Maine is already trending against the rest of the nation: while most states are experiencing recovery after the recession, Maine's rates of hunger and deep poverty are worsening relative to other states.

We are deeply concerned about the State's number of homeless individuals and families, as well as those living with the constant, daily fear of becoming homeless. We worry about the most vulnerable members of our communities whose only option is a shelter. Cutting back on the safety net doesn't mean that Maine families miraculously find stability. It means that they end up in the costly horror of homelessness.

LD 36 would create an arbitrary 9-month cap on General Assistance benefits for those who are deemed "capable of working." Many people receive GA while they await a disability determination from Social Security or the Veterans Administration. Although they have not yet been determined "disabled" they are not able to work. With few exceptions, it always takes well over 9 months to receive such a determination, and usually takes years. My friend and colleague from Homeless Voices for Justice utilized GA while he waited for the VA to process his service-connected disability. Because of GA, this veteran was able to avoid homelessness. Placing an arbitrary cap on GA will mean more homelessness, more people on soup kitchen lines, more people in Emergency Rooms. These crisis services are costly and do not make human sense.

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Many General Assistance offices are not equipped to make determinations of disability. This adds an unnecessary administrative burden on an already taxed municipal operations.

LD 219 would require GA recipients to utilize available resources before accessing GA. GA is already a benefit of last resort. I'm not a lawyer, but we also understand that the law already requires people receiving General Assistance to apply for any other help available to them in order to remain eligible for GA. The law also already disqualifies people from GA if they come to GA after losing any other public benefit because they didn't follow the rules. LD 219 seems unnecessary and redundant to laws already in place. Also, we understand that if someone applies and learns that they have to first try to utilize other resources, they can do that and if it doesn't work out, they then get GA. This seems like common sense. What doesn't seem like common sense is why this bill proposes punishing people in this circumstance by denying access to assistance for four months. How is an applicant supposed to even know that they need to do this before applying?

LD 220 would restrict former TANF families with children from receiving GA. Why would we want to force Maine kids into homelessness and hunger? They may lose their homes or end up in the shelter. Maine's kids should not be punished.

LD 10 would create additional penalties to the ones that currently exist for falsifying an application. The penalty was already revised two years ago and is harsh enough as written in the law. It doesn't make sense that it needs to be revisited at this time or is even a problem that requires your time and attention.

At Preble Street we are alarmed by the numbers of Mainers experiencing homelessness and deep poverty. Although we hear Maine's unemployment numbers are going down for the first time since the recession, Maine's rates of hunger and homelessness persist. Further cuts to the safety net and harsher penalties will only serve to put more Mainers at greater risk.

Please oppose LD 10, 36, 219 and 220.

Thank you for listening and for your consideration.

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