

April 15, 2015



Testimony in Opposition to:

LD 368: An Act To Integrate the State's General Assistance and Temporary Assistance for Needy Families Programs

LD 369: An Act To Align Municipal General Assistance Programs with the Immigration Status Policies of the Department of Health and Human Services

LD 1035: An Act To Create a 9-month Time Limit on General Assistance Benefits

LD 1037: An Act To Establish a 180-day Residency Requirement for Welfare Benefits

By Alysia Melnick, Director of Public Policy, United Way of Greater Portland

Senator Brakey, Representative Gattine, and distinguished members of the Joint Standing Committee on Health and Human Services, my name is Alysia Melnick, and I am the Director of Public Policy at United Way of Greater Portland. United Way of Greater Portland envisions a community that works together to ensure children succeed in school, individuals live healthy lives, and everyone has the opportunity to achieve financial well-being. We are a committed partner in moving people up a financial stability continuum, and support various agencies, programs, and strategies to do so.

Thank you for the opportunity to testify on LDs 368, 369, 1035 and 1037. We oppose these bills.

General Assistance is a program of last resort in part because recipients must make a good faith effort to secure other resources before they can receive assistance. General Assistance is intended as a temporary support to help cover food, medication, utilities, heat, and shelter for individuals and families in crisis once other resources are no longer available.¹ General Assistance effectively provides temporary, essential support to people, most of whom have worked, are working, or who will again work.² For the vast majority of recipients, General Assistance is a short term support that helps people on the path to independence. City of Bangor General Assistance staff report that 81% of recipients receive assistance for 5 months or less and for Fiscal Year 2014, Portland reported 52% of recipients received assistance for 6 months or less.³ Moreover, in Fiscal Year 2014 in Portland, 92% of the assistance granted was used for rent, shelter beds, and food.⁴

¹ 22 M.R.S. §4317.

² According to 2012 research from the University of New England, about 80% of Maine General Assistance recipients had worked in the past five years, 60% had substantial physical or mental health conditions limiting their ability to work, and 92% said that without General Assistance they would have had no place to live. University of New England School of Social Work, "2012 Survey of Longer Term General Assistance Recipients: Preliminary Findings." October 17, 2012.

³ <http://www.portlandmaine.gov/DocumentCenter/Home/View/7160>

⁴ Id.

The changes suggested in these proposals could dramatically harm some of our most vulnerable neighbors, and, in turn, negatively impact our state. If the eligibility changes to General Assistance proposed in these bills are implemented, the issue of homelessness, already a problem, could be exacerbated and the pressures on shelters, food pantries and other low/no barrier services could be overwhelming as more people lose the assistance that allows them to remain in their homes.⁵ General Assistance can serve as a bridge for people from Maine and from away to become active, integrated, hard working, tax paying members of our communities; these bills have the potential to limit the ability of people to contribute to our economy.⁶

The unfortunate reality is that individuals and families continue to struggle. The difficult economy and rising housing costs have left some Mainers with few places to turn. General Assistance is one of those few programs available for temporary, life-saving support to people in need. It is therefore troubling to consider changes to the program that would weaken or undermine it and in the process impose high human and economic costs. We also believe LD 1037 is unconstitutional.

We, like you, are committed to transparency and accountability, and understand that recently, specific concerns have been raised as to eligibility of some recipients of services. These concerns merit review, and we would welcome the opportunity to work with the State and other interested organizations to assess the current system and recommend improvements. However, we believe that our State's most vulnerable must not be left to fend for themselves while improvements are made.

While each of these bills aims to achieve a different outcome, they all will have the likely effect of preventing people in crisis from getting the assistance they need to successfully confront difficult situations and become independent. United Way of Greater Portland is a committed partner in fighting poverty and homelessness. The services we help fund, however, cannot replace a public commitment to serving people in need.

For all these reasons, we respectfully urge you to oppose these bills.

Thank you for your leadership and service.

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⁵ In January 2015, 489 individuals resided in a homeless shelter on a given night in Portland alone. In this same month, ninety of the intakes represented people homeless for the first time.
<http://www.portlandmaine.gov/ArchiveCenter/ViewFile/Item/584>

⁶ Research shows that foreign born individuals have high rates of entrepreneurship, job creation, and add diversity that plays out in a variety of concrete and substantial economic rewards. Immigrants launch more than 1/4 of businesses, are more than twice as likely to start a business as native-born citizens and are founders of nearly half of America's top venture-funded companies. "The Most Entrepreneurial Group in America Wasn't Born in America" Inc., Magazine November 2014. In Maine, from 2006 to 2011, there were 2,711 new immigrant business owners who generated a total net business income of \$120 million. "The Political and Economic Power of Immigrants, Latinos, and Asians in the Pine Tree State." Immigration Policy Center. January 2015.