



**Testimony in Support of LD 1268, An Act to Reform Welfare by Establishing  
Bridges to Sustainable Employment**

**Joint Committee on Health and Human Services  
May 12, 2015**

**Sandra S. Butler, PhD, University of Maine**

Good afternoon, Senator Brakey, Representative Gattine, and distinguished members of the Committee on Health and Human Services. I am here to testify in strong support of LD 1268, An Act to Reform Welfare by Establishing Bridges to Sustainable Employment, and in opposition to LD 452, An Act to Require a Work Search for Job-Ready Applicants for Benefits under the Temporary Assistance for Needy Families Program, and LD 1375, An Act to Increase Accountability in Maine's Welfare Program.

My name is Sandy Butler. I am a Professor of Social Work at the University of Maine and have been conducting research on families receiving AFDC and TANF in Maine for over twenty years. This research has included statewide, random sample surveys; numerous focus groups; and countless individual interviews. With my colleague, Dr. Luisa Deprez, of the University of Southern Maine, I conducted a longitudinal study of the Parents as Scholars Program between 1999 and 2006. More recently, I examined the impact of the 60-month TANF time limit on families cut off of the program in 2012. These studies have underscored findings by scholars throughout the country, that families receiving welfare do so in times of crisis such as domestic violence, divorce, loss of a job, or health problems. I remind you that these are families with dependent children, and any changes to TANF that serve to sanction and punish parents, ultimately impact vulnerable children.

Receiving TANF is demeaning and is never a parent's first choice as she tries to support her children. Unfortunately, reaching economic stability with sustainable employment is currently out of reach from many families on welfare. LD 1268 responds to that reality by establishing a mechanism to support people in gaining and sustaining employment. This bill responds to what we learned this past summer when polling likely Maine voters and a sample of low-income Mainers about the best strategies to reduce poverty. By very large margins, respondents to the poll and survey indicated that reforms should expand opportunity and not punishing people [1]. LD 1268 aims to allow low-income parents to succeed by expanding opportunity. Several of the other bills before you today focus on punishment and sanctions, which are counterproductive, not based on research, and will only serve to hurt Maine children.

In the interest of time and because you are hearing from many people, I will focus on just one aspect of LD 1268—increasing skills and education—which, I submit to you, will be far more effective in moving families to economic self-sufficiency than some of the other so called “welfare reform” bills before you. Moreover, 78% of the Maine public polled this past summer and 88% of the low-income Mainers surveyed, identified increasing access to higher education as one of the best strategies to reduce poverty. LD 1268 establishes a pathway through which basic skills students can advance to college-level occupational programs in order to gain credentials in fields that offer good wages and career achievement. This only makes sense and there is overwhelming evidence that helping people gain skills and education leads to higher pay and more secure employment [2].

Here in Maine, our own study of the Parents as Scholars Program indicated significant increases in earnings and general well-being for participants in the program as they earned their degrees [3]. Despite this high level of success, I note that LD 1375 would make it far more difficult for students to participate in the Parents as Scholars program by adding even more burdensome requirements. As a professor I have taught many PaS students over the years, I can assure you that these students are already working harder than most given the demands of balancing a full academic schedule with those of single parenting. I see this new requirement as a prescription for academic failure.

More recently, our examination of the impact of the 60-month TANF Time Limit law has let us know that parents in more than half the families reaching the time limit lacked a high school education. These individuals lose their benefits without the necessary education and skills to support their families. Many respondents in the study indicated that they could not find employment in large part because they needed more education [4].

Let me conclude by saying why I think the approach taken by LD 1268 is far better than the proposals put forward in LD 452 and LD 1375, both of which require TANF applicants to apply for jobs before they have access to the program’s work readiness services, put in place just two years ago. This new assessment serves to identify the barriers to work faced by recipients of TANF benefits. To date, less than a third of those who have been assessed have been “job ready”. Forcing people to apply for jobs, when they are in crisis and not job-ready, does not serve any useful purpose, but rather serves to punish low-income parents and their children.

We can do better than that and LD 1268 does. By building bridges to sustainable employment, including, though not limited to, increasing access to education, LD 1268 represents welfare reform that is based on sound research, is compassionate, and ultimately will lead to increased employment and tax revenues for our State.

Thank you Senator Brakey, Representative Gattine and members of the committee for allowing me to testify in support of LD 1268 and I would be happy to respond to any questions you may have, either now or in the future.

- [1] Planning Decisions. (2014). *Maine people agree: Opportunities is the bridge to a better future: What we learned about poverty from Maine people in summer of 2014*. Available at [www.mejp.org](http://www.mejp.org) Poverty-Report-Oct-2014\_1.pdf
- [2] Baum, S., Ma, J. & Payea, K. (2013). *Education pays 2013: The benefits of higher education for individuals and society*. Available at Trends in Higher Education website at [trends.collegeboard.org/education-pays](http://trends.collegeboard.org/education-pays)
- [3] Butler, S.S. & Deprez, L. (2008). The Parents as Scholars Program: A Maine success story. *Maine Policy Review*, 17 (1), 40-53.
- [4] Butler, S.S. (2013). *TANF time limits and Maine families: Consequences of withdrawing the safety net*. Available at [www.mejp.org](http://www.mejp.org) TANF-Study-SButler-Feb2013.pdf

Contact information:  
Sandra S. Butler, PhD  
Professor and MSW Coordinator  
School of Social Work  
University of Maine  
(207) 581-2382  
[sbutler@maine.edu](mailto:sbutler@maine.edu)