

Maine Association of Interdependent Neighborhoods

Testimony in Opposition to LD 368, 369, 722, 1035, 1036, and 1037

Senator Brakey, Representative Gattine and members of the Health and Human Services Committee. My name is Kandie Cleaves and I live in Garland. I am a member of the Maine Association of Interdependent Neighborhoods, a volunteer-run coalition of Maine people working together to improve the lives of people living with low income.

I am here today to oppose LD 368, 369, 722, 1035, 1036, and 1037. Each of these bills would leave Maine people without access to General Assistance, our state's most basic safety net. General Assistance is the program that protects people living in the deepest poverty from hunger and homelessness. As critical as the General Assistance Program is, it already has very strict eligibility guidelines. But perhaps the biggest problem that MAIN members and others have faced with this program is the fact that it is not uniform in all municipalities in the State. Even though the same law governs the program in all towns, too often people with the same circumstances in different towns are treated differently. We have also seen many people told that a town's GA budget has been spent and that they can't get help, even though they were eligible and the law requires that they receive assistance. Others from smaller towns have been told to go to Bangor or other cities if they need help.

These experiences are why we have such concern about proposals that would make GA even less accessible to many. We are also troubled that several of these proposals would require volunteer General Assistance administrators in small rural towns throughout the state. These administrators would be empowered to make determinations that have too much potential for error. It also would mean different application in different towns, like whether a person is "able to work" or not, or whether they have "good cause" or not.

We have seen General Assistance make enormous differences in people's lives:

A man from Bangor was born with a genetic condition that causes a number of health issues, from heart disease to learning disabilities. He is able to work, but until recently still lived in a shelter. He wanted to keep his job and get his own place for the first time in his life and better manage his health. He went to GA for help and it was the foundation he needed to get on his feet and stay there. This gentleman may need GA for more than 275 days in 5 years.

Another man from Bangor lost his Maine Care because of budget cuts. He is a diabetic. GA helped with meds that he needed. GA was available to help with rent so he could get off the streets. He is trying to work, but has difficulty finding work. He too could lose the help he needs to manage his diabetes if LD 1035 becomes law.

We recently heard from Karen, a 58 year old mom from Camden who is raising a son with Down's syndrome after being abandoned by her husband. Their home was foreclosed on and they became homeless staying with family and friends two hours away, for a week at a time, and then with a midcoast neighbor for several weeks. The car she depends on to get her son to his services and work when she can is now in danger of being repossessed. On several occasions

she has needed help from GA to pay for utilities, or register her car. She is tremendously grateful for the help she has gotten, and will likely continue to need off and on for some time. When she learned that there were bills to limit General Assistance she told us that it is her lifeline and she can't imagine how stressful it would be not to have General Assistance. Yet she can imagine how easy it could be with her difficult life circumstance to make an inadvertent mistake that could create problems in the complex web of regulations that she must follow.

Karen said she didn't grow up in poverty and that before she found herself between a rock and a hard place, she held negative views of poor people. She blamed them for making bad choices. It was unsettling to realize she had untoward opinions about people living in poverty and then finding herself in similar circumstances. This level of poverty is very eye opening and humbling.

Instead of these proposals that will only cause greater suffering and put more pressure on homeless shelters we ask you to consider reforms that will improve people's lives, that will provide more secure housing and create jobs that can support families. Please believe me when I say no one wants to survive on General Assistance. Instead they want real opportunities for a better life. That is where we ask you to place your focus for "reform."

Thank you for your time.