



Testimony in Opposition to
LD 368, An Act to Integrate the State's General Assistance and Temporary
Assistance for Needy Families Programs

Before the Joint Standing Committee on Health and Human Services

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Good afternoon, Senator Brakey, Representative Gattine, and members of the Committee on Health and Human Services. Unfortunately, I am unable to be with you today due to my teaching schedule, but am grateful to be able to submit this written testimony in opposition to the elimination of General Assistance (GA) for families who have reached the 60-month time limit in the Temporary Assistance to Needy Families (TANF) program as proposed in LD 368, An Act to Integrate the State's General Assistance and Temporary Assistance for Needy Families Programs.

My name is Sandy Butler. I am a professor in the School of Social Work at the University of Maine in Orono and I have been conducting research on the impact of social welfare policies on the lives of low-income families in Maine for over two decades.

I know from research I recently conducted on the impact of the TANF time limit law, that many families are left destitute with multiple barriers to economic independence once their TANF benefits are cut off. General Assistance is often what separates these families from homelessness. I remind you these are families with children and removing General Assistance as a potential resource will have dire consequences for these children—often very young children, in their early developmental years.

As a result of the 60-month TANF time limit law, 1,500 families and 2,700 children lost benefits in its first five months of implementation, between June and October 2012. Fifty-four of those families were part of a study I completed in the fall of 2012 (Butler, 2013). By December 2012 26% of all families receiving help from TANF had been terminated due to the 60-month time limit, including 6,000 children. I was able to do in-

depth interviews with 13 of the people first surveyed in 2012, one year later to see how they were doing (Butler, 2014). The Executive Summaries from these two reports are attached to this testimony for your review. I will mention just a few findings here to support my position that GA should remain an option for these very vulnerable families.

We learned from a representative sample of TANF families in 2010 that most families receiving TANF in Maine do so for less than two years. Those who receive benefits for longer periods of time are very likely to have an adult or child with a disability—this was true for nearly 90% of those families receiving TANF for five years or more in the 2010 study (McLaughlin & Butler, 2011).

So it is not surprising that families who have been cut off the program due to the 60-month time limit are facing many barriers to securing employment. And while families with disabilities can apply for an extension of TANF benefits, our studies found that many do not know they can apply, are advised not to apply, or are denied the extension.

Among the families in our first study, nearly two-fifths (39%) had an adult with a work-limiting disability and one-quarter (26%) had a child or other dependent family member with a disability. These families were no longer receiving TANF despite the fact that an extension for families coping with disability is provided for by law. Over two-fifths (41%) of the families had less than a high school diploma. Clearly many of these families will be unable to work through no fault of their own due to disabilities or inability to find employment due to a lack of skills. Those individuals who were working were making very low-wages (with an average of \$9 per hour) and were only able to work part-time. After losing TANF, 40% of the families in our study had no income whatsoever (Butler, 2013).

We learned from our study that families faced severe hardships after losing their TANF benefits: 70% had to go to a food bank; a third lost a utility service; and one-fifth were evicted, had to move in with friends or family, or go to a homeless shelter. Again, I remind you these are families with children. There is substantial research indicating that the consequences of severe poverty for children are profound and long lasting, impacting brain development and lifetime outcomes in terms of education, employment, public welfare receipt and criminal activity (Duncan & Magnuson, 2011).

The 2013 report includes eight interviews with individuals who lost their TANF benefits due to time limits including one with a woman I will call Kate, who I was also able to interview for our 2014 study. She suffers from anxiety, depression, and post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) from a previous abusive relationship. She had applied for Supplemental Security Income (SSI) prior to losing TANF, but had been denied. Her husband has a physical disability after many years of working in the woods and with heavy machinery. He was in the process of applying for Social Security Disability Insurance (SSDI) at the time of the first interview, and was waiting for a decision at the time of the second.

The loss of TANF resulted in Kate losing her apartment and her family breaking apart. The two youngest children were taken from her by the Department of Health and Human Services (DHHS) and placed in foster care—at some expense to the State—due to her loss of housing. She was allowed unsupervised visitation until she secured stable housing and her children could live with her again. She sent two other children to live with their father, the man who had previously abused her; she was not happy about doing this but he had income from disability benefits that would help to support the children and she had none and no other options for their care. Ultimately, he was unable to adequately care for the children and they too came under State care. Kate was denied an extension of TANF benefits three times before she sought the assistance of Pine Tree Legal Assistance; with their help she was granted a six-month extension in TANF benefits, giving her time to apply for SSI once again.

With the help of GA and her caseworker, Kate was able to secure a new apartment and reunite with her children. At the time of the second interview, she had begun receiving SSI and was extremely relieved to have her children with her again. General Assistance was critical in helping her to regain stability in a crisis for which she had no other source of help.

This is one story among many of families who have lost their TANF benefits and who may need help from their towns through the GA program. Families losing TANF benefits due to the 60-month time limit are some of our most vulnerable in the state. They have significant barriers to employment and often need additional help to become economically independent. General Assistance can help ease some of the hardships they face and help to keep families together and stable, ultimately saving the State money.

Thank you for allowing me to provide this written testimony in opposition to this proposed cut in General Assistance. Please let me know if I can be of any assistance as you consider the merits of removing this support for such vulnerable Maine families with children.

References

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