



April 15, 2015

**2015 ADVOCATES:**

Testimony in Opposition to LDs 368, 369, 632, 722, 1035, and 1037

DEE CLARKE

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Good afternoon Senator Brakey, Representative Gattine, and members of the Joint Standing Committee on Health and Human Services. My name is John Monahan and I am an advocate with Homeless Voices for Justice. I am here today to testify in opposition to LDs 368, 369, 632, 722, 1035, and 1037.

**PROJECT STAFF:**

ASHLEY GORCZYCA,  
COMMUNITY  
ORGANIZER

Homeless Voices for Justice is a grassroots group that works for social change on behalf of people who are experiencing homelessness and poverty. We advocate for solutions to issues that impact Maine's most vulnerable individuals and communities, and aim to influence policies that will improve the lives of every man, woman, and child living in poverty.

General Assistance is a program of last resort. It helps the most vulnerable individuals and families pay for their rent and utilities, put food on the table, and get life-saving prescriptions filled. Those who use GA do so because they have little to nothing else to help them while they get back on their feet. We should be strengthening this program, not limiting it for those who need help the most.

Asylum seekers – those who have escaped persecution, war, and death – have nothing but their skills and the clothes on their backs when they arrive in the United States. They have come here to build better lives for their families, be successful, and live happily. Unfortunately, GA is one of the only programs they likely qualify for. Taking away this assistance would be devastating. For Joao Ndongala, his wife and four children, not having GA would lead them to become homeless. They've come here from Angola to escape conditions I can't even imagine. Until he receives his work authorization, which he hopes to get in August, he is unable to work.

These cuts would also impact people with mental illness and disabilities. Capping GA benefits at nine months would mean those whose disability is not apparent, or those who do not have access to a physician, may not get assistance even though they may be unable to work. They would be left with nothing. I am one of them. I have been diagnosed with various challenges including bipolar disorder, severe depression and schizoaffective disorder, but I still do not receive disability. Although I work with a licensed social worker and doctor to help manage my mental health, the constant threat of losing my GA benefits and becoming homeless again scares me. I have no family to help me. Without GA, I'd lose my independence.

**Homeless Voices for Justice**

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The other proposals before you will also have catastrophic consequences. Requiring one to be a resident of the State of Maine for 180 days before they are able to receive MaineCare, GA, TANF, or SNAP benefits is wrong. People who move to Maine to work and start their lives over make a commitment to our State. They've made a choice that Maine is where they want to be, and should therefore be eligible for any program they qualify for. We are talking about health care, food, and housing – the basic necessities of survival. Without these programs, people would be left homeless, hungry, and in poor health. That sends a terrible message to people – one we should stay far away from. We should welcome people who want to be a part of our great state with open arms, not forcing them to the streets.

Human beings are unique and their stories complicated. But no matter where people come from or the situation they currently find themselves in, one thing is clear. Each and every individual is worthy of success and access to the resources to get them there. Instead of further limiting these resources, which LDs 368, 369, 632, 722, 1035, and 1037 most certainly do, we should be allowing vulnerable individuals and families to live with dignity and respect. Without General Assistance, our already overcrowded shelters and soup kitchens would be filled with more people unable to make ends meet, people who, had they been given the opportunity to get back on their feet, could lead fulfilling lives.

On behalf of myself and Homeless Voices for Justice, I strongly urge you to oppose these bills.

Thank you.