

Testimony before the Health and Human Services Committee

Maine Association of Interdependent Neighborhoods

April 24, 2017

Good afternoon Senator Brakey, Representative Hymanson and honorable members of the Health and Human Services Committee of the Maine State Legislature. 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 in poverty.

I am from the community that you are speaking about and making decisions about today. I know what it is to be poor. It is my experience that the best way to help people out of poverty is to create opportunity. Employment with no supports often leaves a family in poverty drowning. Employment with supports creates stability in families and a sustainable work situation.

I want to voice my support for LD 336, An Act to Amend the Requirements of the Temporary Assistance for Needy Families Program. As you all know, to be eligible for TANF a family must show that their children are "deprived of the care and support of a natural or adoptive parent for at least 30 days beyond the date of application." This means that one parent doesn't live with the children or exercise half of the responsibility of care for the children. The law defines "deprivation" also as a two parent household in which one parent is disabled or is unemployed or underemployed. But often the way deprivation is interpreted hurts Maine families profoundly. I want to share a few stories with you now that show how this is frequently misapplied resulting in denial of benefits to families that should be eligible.

- A mom from Livermore Falls was in her first 6 months at a new job and though she was earning sick time she wasn't allowed to take it during the 6 month probationary period. Her children were sick twice and she was sick once and she got fired. She couldn't get unemployment because she hadn't worked long enough so she applied for TANF. When she did she was denied because the children's father sees them on average about two days a week—the worker told her that this meant there was no "deprivation."
- A mom from the town of Washington had been getting TANF and volunteering as her ASPIRE participation. The child's father who lived several miles away had been unable to find work so tried to help out by riding his bicycle several miles a day to come babysit for their child while mom volunteered. Then DHHS said that because dad is seeing the child several times a week, mom is no longer eligible for TANF. So mom had to find other childcare for the child and not only did ASPIRE then have to pay for daycare but the child was now deprived of the frequent contact with his father.

- A mom from Oakland was denied TANF due to lack of deprivation because the child goes to see dad frequently on the weekends. Dad doesn't pay child support and doesn't take the child if she's sick and even refused to take the child temporarily when mom was homeless. The only way that mom would be able to get TANF to help stabilize her life would be if she cuts off the child's contact with her father.
- A family from Augusta which includes dad who works in Freeport, two children, and mom who has early stages of Multiple Sclerosis and is unable to work. Dad's car broke down and faced losing his job if he was unable to get to work. Even though they are income eligible, and even though Dad faced the loss of his job because of transportation crisis that the Alternative Aid program was designed to address, this family couldn't get help from the program because Alternative Aid uses the same deprivation criterion as TANF and the worker found "no deprivation" because both parents were living together. If LD 336 became law, this would change and families like this one would get the help they need.
- One young family of 4 in Bath are trying so hard to get on their feet. The father is a handyman and does various carpentry jobs. His hours fluctuate and it's difficult to predict what their income might be from one month to the next. The mom is a part time fast food worker. Most months the family was bringing in income that was below the TANF income limits. Still they were denied TANF because of the deprivation clause. This left them scrambling to afford the transportation and child care that made work possible. And it left them with little hope of going back to school to make a better future for their family. This family's income was the same as that of one headed by a single parent of comparable size, but because there were two parents in the home they didn't qualify for TANF. If dad moved out and stopped caring for the kids, mom would be eligible. Why would we ever want this kind of disincentive to having both parents involved in children's lives?

There is a reason most states did away with the so-called deprivation clause 20 years ago. It's time Maine does the same. Denying TANF to two parent families even when their income is low enough to otherwise meet the TANF income limits is hard to understand. Poverty is enough of a strain on a family. We know how important it is for children to remain connected to both parents if possible. We should pass laws that help keep families connected and together rather than force them apart.

I would also like to urge you to support the increase in the special housing allowance as laid out in this bill. For most of the families we talk to housing is by far the biggest expense. And housing security is one of the biggest factors that determines a child's health and wellbeing. Increasing the special housing allowance for TANF families with high housing costs is absolutely critical at a time when so many families are at risk of homelessness in Maine.

Thank you for considering this important bill.