



Maine Association of Interdependent Neighborhoods

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Testimony In Opposition to

LD 1815 An Act To Require a Work Search for Job-ready Applicants for Benefits under the Temporary Assistance for Needy Families Program

LD1822 An Act To Increase Integrity in the Temporary Assistance for Needy Families Program through Restriction of Expenditures

LD1820 An Act To Reduce Abuse of the Temporary Assistance for Needy Families Program through Restriction of Electronic Benefits Transfers

March 25, 2014

Good afternoon Senator Craven, Representative Farnsworth and members of the Health & Human Services Committee.

My name is Kandie Desell from Garland. I am speaking today on behalf of the Maine Association of Interdependent Neighborhoods, better known as MAIN. MAIN is an all-volunteer statewide coalition of individuals and organizations that since 1980 has been a voice for the concerns of people with low and moderate-income.

Our members are very concerned about this proposal to require an up-front work search for TANF applicants. As you know there is already a significant work requirement that families must meet as soon as they are found eligible. Many were especially concerned that at the very least it would delay critical assistance to families already in crisis and at worst would keep some families from applying at all because they knew that it was impossible for them to fulfill this requirement pushing them into homeless or having to deny their children's very basic needs. While we understand that there is a provision in this bill that would only apply it to people who are "ready to work" we do not have confidence that this will provide the protection needed at such a critical time based on the long experience of our members who have been inappropriately denied such protections in the past.

Here are three examples of families we know who could not have complied with this proposed requirement and as a result would have been at risk of not getting the help that their families needed:

Sara lives in rural Maine with her preschool age son who is blind. She lives there because her grandmother owns the mobile home and does not charge her much rent. She worked cleaning

motel rooms for several months, driving her unregistered, uninsured vehicle an hour and a half just to get to the job. Every day she hoped that she'd get to work and back home without the transmission dying or without being stopped by the police. She tried to save up enough money to fix her car but given her low wages and high travel costs, she just couldn't do it. Eventually, her vehicle gave out and she is now without transportation. Though she was able to work when she applied for TANF and wanted to go back to work, she had no transportation. There is zero public transportation in her area and no one nearby with whom she could even car pool. What good would it do for her to apply for 3 jobs before applying for TANF? Even if she had a job offer, she would have to refuse it. Now that she has TANF, Sara applied for help from a local charity that pays for car repairs, and between them and ASPIRE car repair assistance, she is hoping to be back on the road soon. However, she needed TANF and help from ASPIRE before being able to honestly tell an employer that she was able to take a job. . It would be a shame to burn her bridges with a potential future employer by applying for a job before being able to actually accept it.

Christine worked at a job she loved. It gave her the flexibility to call her husband every couple of hours throughout the day to check in with him, and go home if needed. Usually just having a 5 minute conversation with him enabled her to talk him out of a delusion and bring him back to reality so she could then resume her work. Unfortunately, she lost that job due to budget cuts. Although she quickly found another job, it did not give her the flexibility of her previous position. With this new job, she was unreachable from 8 in the morning until she returned home at 3:00. Arriving home, she usually found her husband out of touch with reality and having a delusional episode. It would take her the whole night to bring him back. It was incredibly stressful on her and her children. It was an unsustainable situation. Having no other choice, she left her job in order to prevent her husband from ending up in a psychiatric hospital as has happened in the past. Christine is job ready, has a work history as a very valued employee and would be able to find another job fairly quickly but she would not be able to maintain the employment due to her husband's mental health. Again, what good would it do for her to have to apply for 3 jobs before applying for TANF? It would be unfair to her and would waste any potential employer's time. TANF provides the safety net needs to keep her family afloat while she continues to look for a job that could give her the flexibility to meet her family's special needs. She would be thrilled to return to work should such an opportunity arise.

Stacey lives in Central Maine with her 3 children. She has some physical and mental health issues but could probably work part time if those were the only obstacles she faced. Unfortunately, all three of her children have either mental or physical health problems as well. Stacey seldom goes a week without several medical appointments because of her 17 year old who has been diagnosed as bi-polar, her 14 year old who has anxiety and depression and gets in-home mental health services for which Stacey must be present, and her 4 year old who has severe allergies and asthma. Additionally, Stacey has a high school diploma that would not qualify her for the kind of jobs that might possibly give her the flexibility to take time off to go to medical appointments.

Stacey did have a job prospect a while back but when she checked with every daycare provider in her area, she was unable to find anyone willing to take her 4 year old due to his severe allergies and asthma.

These stories demonstrate the reasons that MAIN members oppose an up-front work search as an obstacle to TANF eligibility where they could get the help and services that they need to resolve barriers to work. We also question whether or not these families could be assessed properly and quickly to determine 'job readiness' or 'good cause' so that they wouldn't have to meet this requirement. Too often, families have had been denied 'good cause' only to appeal and be granted it later. Later is not good enough when a family is in crisis.

Instead, MAIN believes that the new assessment process should be given a chance to work. These assessments help DHHS understand individual situations and provide the information that will help them families overcome barriers to work. This approach makes sense – first meet the family's immediate needs with TANF benefits then help them address their barriers to work so that they can move forward. We urge you to oppose LD 1815.

MAIN also hopes that this committee will reject the Governor's proposals to restrict the use of EBT cards. While we may not want TANF funds to be used for tobacco, alcohol or gambling, we also don't believe the Department is capable of regulating these purchases without further stigmatizing people who receive benefits. Part of the original reason for putting benefits on an EBT card was to provide some privacy for families who need assistance. No one has shown this to be a big problem and there is no reason to assume the worst of people because they are poor. The Legislature also has addressed this issue by prohibiting EBT use in certain establishments that primarily sell these products. Poor people don't need this kind of public scrutiny and judgment as they stand at the check-out to buy their toilet paper, shampoo and other products not covered by SNAP benefits. We also oppose the proposal to restrict the use of EBT benefits out of state. Why would you create a barrier for a family to travel for a medical appointment or to see a family member who is ill or to attend a funeral? MAIN urges you to oppose LD 1820 and 1822.