

Testimony of Gretchen Neubelt  
In Opposition to LD 1842 - An Act To Amend the Laws Governing the  
Temporary Assistance for Needy Families Program  
March 25, 2014

Good afternoon Senator Craven, Representative Farnsworth and members of the Committee on Health and Human Services, my name is Gretchen Neubelt and I live in Machias with my 4 year old daughter. I drove the 3 hours to Augusta today because it's so important that you understand the issues before you. I'm here to testify against LD 1842 which would not only eliminate the good cause provisions in ASPIRE but would also eliminate the Parents as Scholars program, which is the only pathway out of poverty for me and my daughter.

First, I'd like to talk a little about the Parents as Scholars Program, known as PaS. Prior to enrolling in school at the University of Maine at Machias I worked for a cleaning company and then later as a CNA. I liked the CNA work but it didn't pay a livable wage. I realized that in order to support myself and my daughter, I would need a college degree. I have been working day and night for almost 4 years now, squeezing every moment out of every day, attending college full time, keeping up with my studies, fitting in a few hours of work each week, volunteering at a local legal services organization as part of my PaS requirements, and spending every moment possible with my daughter who has had no contact with her father in over a year.

I know it will all be worth the incredible effort this takes, when I walk away with my college diploma and can show prospective employers the long list of achievements I've accomplished and awards I've received. Some of those include:

- I have made the Dean's list the last 4 semesters.
- I received the Alumni Scholarship Award in the Spring of 2013
- I was nominated for the Heart and Soul Award, given to just 6 students out of 17 university locations in the State of Maine. I was nominated by my professors and UMM President, Cynthia Huggins, for the work I've done in the community.
- I'm on the Policy Council at my daughter's Head Start.
- I've been invited to participate on the State's TANF Advisory Council.
- I was a guest speaker at the Community Caring Collaborative Advocacy Training in January of this year.
- I am the Teaching Assistant and tutor for the Physiological Psychology class at UMM and due the professor's recent injury was given the task of facilitating the class on 3 occasions this semester.
- I was one of six students featured in an article on exceptional students published in the November issue of Working Waterfront. These students were recommended by their professors.
- This year's Alumni newsletter will also have an article about me as an exceptional student. An honor also recommended by my professors.

I truly believe I'll not only find work in a career that's personally rewarding, but that also gives me and my daughter financial stability and provides a valuable service to my community.

I'm sure there will be people here today that tell you how Parents as Scholars is an incredibly important program that helps families move out of poverty. They'll give you the statistics, and policy arguments

that are compelling and probably quite dramatic. However, I also wanted you to understand it on a personal level. Without the supports I get from PaS, especially child care, I fear the future that I envision for me and my daughter, that future that's almost within my grasp, will slip away.

Please, for me and my daughter, and for the hundreds of other families working and studying, and volunteering in their communities, and raising their children with hopes of a bright future, I implore you to keep the Parents as Scholars program intact and continue to support the program and the successful futures this program creates.

The other issue I want to address today is that of good cause. I've had to rely on good cause in the past in order to keep my benefits. As most working parents know, there are often crises, both major and minor, that sometimes come at you all at once that can cause certain tasks to fall by the wayside. In my case, I was late passing in my time verification sheets with signatures from each of my professors for each college class I attended.

It was a particularly difficult time for me. My daughter was just 2 years old at the time. It was winter and I was taking a full course load at University of Maine at Machias, along with an adult ed class in the evenings. I had earned a 3.4 GPA the previous semester and was determined to maintain my grades at that level. I was also trying to get my taxes and my FAFSA filed and applying for nursing school at University of Maine at Orono. My daughter and I were dealing with the usual winter colds and flu which always set people back just a little. And then my grandfather died and as he had always been my only father figure, I was feeling more overwhelmed than usual.

I received notice that I was late with my attendance sheets on a Friday and had them on my worker's desk the following Monday. However, when I tried to assert my good cause reasons for being late, I was initially told it was insufficient. So, please know that DHHS does not grant good cause easily. Even what may seem to some of us to be a fairly minor offense is taken very seriously by one's ASPIRE specialist. I appealed their denial of good cause to a Fair Hearing and through that process was eventually granted good cause, which allowed my benefits to continue.

The good cause reasons set out in the ASPIRE rules have been well thought out by people like you who make policy decisions. However, in large part they're also just plain common sense. How could you possibly expect an ASPIRE participant to go to work, school, or their volunteer placement if their child care arrangement fell through that day? Or if snow and ice was causing others in their area to stay home? Or if they or their child is sick or if they just had a death in the family? People who receive TANF are human beings, just like you. We make every effort to fulfill our obligations but sometimes things beyond our control get in the way. Should that mean that one gets sanctioned and loses their child care or their TANF cash benefit? I don't believe it should as long as they can show they had a good reason for failing to comply and then come into compliance right away. Good cause was included in the rules for some well thought out reasons and it's important that it remain.

For all the reasons stated above, I request that you reject LD 1842 and vote it out of committee as "ought not to pass."

Thank you for listening to my comments.