

Joielle Lunny

Testimony before Health and Human Services Committee

Opposition to LD 452 and LD 1375

Senator Brakey, Representative Gattine, my name is Joielle Lunny and I am from Springvale. I am here today to testify in opposition to LD 452 and 1375. I hope that my story will help you understand the kinds of circumstances that too many TANF families face and why a simple idea like looking for 3 jobs is nowhere near as simple as it appears.

I am the mother of 4 beautiful children. My daughter, Emma, is here with me today. She's a straight A student and plays the clarinet. My 15 year old son is class president at Sanford High. My 9 year old is the drama queen of the family and the baby of the family is 8. I tell you all this because we are a strong family unit and that is what gets us through most days. 16 years ago, my husband was diagnosed with paranoid schizophrenia. We were expecting our first child and TANF was a lifesaver for us under those circumstances. My husband had been diagnosed in June and my son was born in November so we were reeling from his diagnosis, all the care that he needed at that time and my first pregnancy. It was hard to see what our future held.

My husband has always been the ideal patient. He never denied he had a mental illness. He went to every doctors' appointment, always took his meds. We've done case management; he's had counselors, home visits and therapies. Given the nature of his illness, the paranoia precludes him from being with people he doesn't know. He has a very difficult time developing relationships – it is even strained with his own family. What is truly remarkable is that in all these years, my husband has only been hospitalized once and that was 15 years ago. It is because the work we've done together to keep him safe that he isn't going in and out of the hospital and in and out of crisis. We do it together and my availability to be his primary care person is critical in the process.

Because of the extensive care that he needs on a day to day basis, we remained on TANF until I found a job that could really accommodate my family's needs. I went back to work and I worked for 5 years as a Children's Services Coordinator at Caring Unlimited. Those 5 years were very hard for him. He was the primary child caregiver until it got too hard with his illness. I always had to be available by the phone if he called or needed anything. One time he called me at work. "I have the right to defend myself, right?" he said into the phone. My heart stopped. He said the neighbors were outside with pick axes and were talking about him. He told me he was in the kitchen where he could access the knives if he needed to.

At this point I knew my older children were due to come home from school and I could only imagine him not recognizing them coming through the door and thinking it was the neighbors. I told him he was safe and to stay right where he was, I was coming right home. I had to leave everything at work immediately. Thankfully I got home before my older kids got home and before my husband was pushed to the point of acting on his paranoid thoughts. The babies were playing and watching cartoons and my husband was huddled in the kitchen, totally frightened.

The next day, the first thing I did was register my youngest children with a child care center and we were able to get a sliding scale voucher. When June came around and all 4 kids would be home for the summer under his care, we knew I needed to leave my job. I'm not the type of person to quit something. I loved my job: I used to say "I will never quit this job". But there were times when he just couldn't care for them and I was left to take them to work with me. This wasn't appropriate for my kids or the clients I was serving. Caring Unlimited really wanted to keep me and worked with me to tailor the work to my needs but within 2 weeks the organization lost a \$300,000 grant and they had to lay me off more permanently. That was rough because I couldn't imagine finding a job that would give us the flexibility that we needed. And as I suspected, since then I've only found work that made matters worse at home. I took a job as an Ed Tech working with a special needs student. It was the opposite of flexible. The hours were 8am – 3. I couldn't take calls during the day. My husband was a mess. I realized I couldn't keep him safe and keep that job.

I've spent over a decade trying to figure out how to work and take care of my ill husband and our kids. My caseworker and I have come up with employment options that have all hit dead ends – how can I run a daycare in my home with my husband shut in his bedroom 8 hrs. a day? How can I run a tutoring program with set appointments when I never know on any given day whether I will be able to leave the house or not? My husband's doctor has written letters about how it doesn't make sense for me to work outside our home given my husband's needs and condition. It's of the utmost importance that he can stay at home and be cared for at home. This is what keeps him stable and secure. And this ultimately saves our community and our state money because he's home and not in the hospital.

The bill before you does not work and cannot work for families like mine. Some might think we would come under the exception provided for under this proposal, but I want to tell you that when I applied for a similar extension from TANF when we reached the 5 year time limit I was denied multiple times and only when I got a lawyer to intervene for me was I able to get the help I needed. Applying for 3 jobs that I could never accept or keep doesn't address the problem at the root. It wastes the time of the employers and it doesn't make any sense.

My daughter Emma was recently chosen to participate in Girls' Day at the State House. I told her "if you get to meet legislators be respectful." She said, "Well if I get a chance to talk, I'm going to talk about how hard it is for us, Mama." It's hard when even your children recognize how difficult it is, as much as you try to spare them from the worry and stress.

Please don't let this bill go through. It will hurt many families like mine.

Thank you.

Joielle Lunny