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April 10, 2017

Re: **LD 10: An Act to Build Greater Accountability into the General Assistance Program by Increasing the Penalty for Falsely Representing Information on an Application for General Assistance; LD 36: An Act to Create a 9-month Time Limit on General Assistance; LD 219: An Act to Prioritize Use of Available Resources in General Assistance Programs; and LD 220: An Act to Align Time Limits in the Municipal General Assistance Program and Temporary Assistance for Needy Families Program.**

Senator Brakey, Representative Hymanson, and members of the Joint Standing Committee on Health and Human Services, my name is Elizabeth Baranick. As an Asset Manager for Community Housing of Maine (CHOM), I work with many individuals and families who would otherwise be homeless were it not for the General Assistance (GA) program. CHOM is the largest provider of housing for individuals and families experiencing homelessness in the state of Maine. We, and our collaborative service-provider partners, are already operating in challenging times due to the lack of available housing vouchers and financial pressures on service agencies. The General Assistance program is a critical component of moving people out of shelters, keeping people housed, and stabilizing families. I urge you to reject these changes.

I oppose LD 10, LD 36, LD 219, and LD 220, because they neither correct nor improve laws already in effect. They merely impose greater hardship on those least able to withstand the changes. In fact, it is more cost-effective to house our neighbors than allow them to become or remain homeless.

LD 10: An Act to Build Greater Accountability into the General Assistance Program by Increasing the Penalty for Falsely Representing Information on an Application for General Assistance

- There are already significant penalties for deliberately falsifying information to obtain GA. Adding a more punitive disqualification time-period will put people at serious risk. For example, while appealing a wrongful decision, a family would have to do without this crucial gap funding, leaving them vulnerable to homelessness, hunger, or literally in the cold or dark because their utilities have been disconnected. Stark prices for people just trying to make ends meet.

LD 36: An Act to Create a 9-month Time Limit on General Assistance

- The proposal to arbitrarily limit GA to 9 months in a 5-year period will only punish those who need it most. If you are waiting for a disability determination, you are fleeing domestic violence, you experience job loss(es) or health crises, or you are one of the thousands of Mainers on wait lists for subsidized housing or a housing voucher, the 9 month GA cap will have catastrophic consequences: homelessness, sickness, family disruption, death.

LD 219: An Act to Prioritize Use of Available Resources in General Assistance Programs

- Current law already requires people receiving General Assistance to apply for all other available resources to obtain and maintain GA eligibility. Applicants must prove their need by supplying receipts for all purchases made to ensure they are only buying necessities before they qualify for GA. It can be a confusing process best left to those who administer it without arbitrary constraints.



LD 220: An Act to Align Time Limits in the Municipal General Assistance Program and Temporary Assistance for Needy Families Program

- The proposed change appears unduly punitive to families living in poverty. Housing costs have risen beyond a reasonable threshold for many families. In addition to onerous rent, it is often a struggle to cover the cost of food, clothing, medical care, and basic utilities. Any unanticipated expense can send a family into a financial tailspin. GA is their last resort. It often takes a very small sum to keep a household intact, a much smaller sum than the consequences of taking away this vital safety net.

These proposed measures to curtail General Assistance will have a harmful, societal ripple effect that will cost us more in the long run. Mainers who need, but are denied a "hand up", will end up in shelters or on the street, families will break, children will suffer, and illnesses will remain untreated until emergency services are required. I urge you not to enact these changes.

Thank you for your attention and consideration.