

Good Afternoon Senator Brakey, Representative Hymanson and members of the Joint Standing Committee on Health and Human Services. Thank you for the opportunity to speak with you today in support of LD 336.

My name is Meagan Rogers, I'm a 35 year old single mother with a 7 year old son named Jake. I have my son a majority of the time and have since I divorced 5 years ago. I have split custody with my ex-husband and primary residence is with me. I support my son having a healthy relationship with his father which consists of his father having his son 6 days a month. For the past 4 years I have received no financial support from my ex-husband and have managed to keep a roof over our heads and food on our table and I've always felt very good about that. In August of last year I became ill and was out of work on FLMA for 10 weeks. About 3 weeks in, I realized we could not make it long enough for me to get well without some assistance. As a former DHHS employee, I was somewhat aware of what was available. I applied for benefits, including TANF. The worker that I spoke to at the times questioned me about the relationship between my son and his father. I explained that he did not provide for him financially but he did have him 6 days a month. The worker asked me "If your son fell down the stairs, what would your ex-husband do?" and I stated that he would take care of our son. The worker stated that I was not eligible for TANF benefits because that proved that my son was not deprived by his father. While I certainly didn't agree with the worker's statement, I accepted the decision and was told the only way to receive TANF was to be found disabled by MaineCare standards.

I started the process of applying for disability through MaineCare at that time. After that experience, I asked several of my friends including a supervisor who are either former or current employees with OFI, how they would have handled that situation and almost every one of them answered the question differently. The supervisor was in agreement of how the case was handled. A few of them stated that they would have recommended that I apply for child support. I knew that if I was approved for TANF, they would start the child support process however with no income coming into our home; I knew I couldn't wait so I started the process myself. I returned to work part-time in November and after seeking assistance from MEJP, I did later that month finally receive approval for TANF based on disability. Child support was eventually received in January of this year. I received shut off notices and eviction notices while waiting for this assistance to come through and being that I was already out of work due to illness, the added stress only made things worse.

I am now back to work full-time and life is finally straightening out but being that I take great pride in working and supporting myself and my son, I was very frustrated with the system that is supposed to be there for you if you fall on hard times, even if just temporarily. To think that a 7 year old boy living in a home with no income is not proof of deprivation is still something I struggle to comprehend.

As I know from my time working for DHHS, workers don't have the time to sort out the complicated issues involved with deprivation. It's too complicated, it takes too much time, and it's too easy to make mistakes. We should have clear rules that can be applied fairly and consistently in all cases. You can't do that with the current deprivation rules.

There is a simple answer to this problem, and that is to get rid of outmoded rules like deprivation that discriminate against parents that are trying to work together to raise their children, either by living together or working together after separation. Treating all families raising children fairly, and applying the same rules to them will ensure more fair and uniform use of the program and will be in the best interest of our children as well.

Parents should not be prevented from getting the help we need because we are trying to work with the other parent. We should be encouraged to work together to raise our children, even when we are not together as a couple. Supporting my son and his father having a meaningful connection shouldn't keep me from getting the help we need, but that's exactly what the deprivation standard does. Having strong relationships with both parents is important for my son's development, and it's better for children and families generally. Our state's policies should support that. Please support LD 336.

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