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Testimony in Opposition to LD 368, 369, 722, 1035, 1036, and 1037 April 15, 2015

Senator Brakey, Representative Gattine, and members of the Joint Standing Committee on Health and Human Services, my name is Cullen Ryan, and I am the Executive Director of Community Housing of Maine or CHOM, which with nine staff effectively and efficiently house over 1000 of Maine's most vulnerable people.

I testify today on behalf of the Maine Homeless Policy Committee, which addresses policy concerns on behalf of the Statewide Homeless Council and the Maine Continuum of Care.

I testify in opposition to a number of bills in front of you today. These include:

LD 368 – An Act To Integrate the State's General Assistance and Temporary Assistance for Needy Families Programs. This bill provides that a person who has exhausted the 60-month lifetime limit on Temporary Assistance for Needy Families program benefits is ineligible to receive municipal general assistance program benefits.

- There does not appear to be a lifetime limit on poverty. Putting an arbitrary lifetime limit on the safety net for people in poverty without exceptions is dangerous to the few who need it, and particularly their children. Those who have exhausted the 60-month lifetime limit for TANF are likely among those with complicated issues beyond poverty and are most in need safety net resources, such as General Assistance.

LD369 – An Act to Align Municipal General Assistance Programs with the Immigration Status Policies of DHHS. This bill provides that a person who has been determined ineligible to receive benefits administered by the Department of Health and Human Services on the basis of a law, rule or regulation related to that person's immigration status is ineligible to receive municipal general assistance program benefits.

- This bill further guts the safety net for human beings who are attempting to rebuild their lives to become productive citizens of the State of Maine. A safety net is to ensure people are safe. Undermining the safety net is dangerous for people. People seeking Asylum are among those most likely to being working as soon as they are able, after the mandatory federal waiting period to obtain a work permit. Demonstrated patterns suggest that this population is likely to need very little assistance after obtaining work status. They want to work and contribute to the community which has helped them rebuild their lives – our safety net programs are essential for this.

LD 722 – An Act to Strengthen Penalties for Abuse of General Assistance. This bill provides that a person who makes a false representation of a material fact to obtain municipal general assistance is ineligible to receive further assistance for a period of the longer of 120 days and until that reimbursement is made. Current law provides for a period of ineligibility of 120 days.

- The rules governing General Assistance can be confusing and it is possible for people to



make errors. Finding ways to further punish people in need of assistance, or fix problems within an arbitrary timeframe, is not consistent with the real work of helping people get on their feet. Clarifying General Assistance eligibility requirements seems much more prudent and would benefit the entire program. Let's not punish the few who quite understandably misinterpret very complicated guidelines.

LD 1035 – An Act to Create a 9-month Time Limit on General Assistance Benefits. This bill limits to a maximum of 275 days every 5 years the general assistance benefits a person who does not have any dependents and who is capable of working may receive.

- Poverty is not so neat so as to fit into a perfect box of need. Imposing arbitrary rules does not allow trained assessors to take into account the complexities of real life situations and address poverty affecting the individual or family. The small subset of people who need assistance longer than this arbitrary limit are working toward self-sufficiency, but will be forced out of stable housing and directly into homelessness once they meet this time limit. And it will block the escape route out of emergency shelters, locking people into homelessness with no resolution.

LD 1036 – An Act to Prioritize Use of Available Resources in General Assistance Programs. This bill makes an applicant for general assistance who voluntarily abandons or refuses to use an available resource without just cause ineligible to receive general assistance to replace the abandoned resource for a period of 120 days from the date the applicant abandons the resource. The bill defines "available resource" as a resource that is immediately available or can be secured without delay. The bill also makes an applicant who forfeits an available resource due to fraud, misrepresentation or intentional violation or refusal to comply with rules without just cause ineligible to receive general assistance to replace the forfeited resource for the duration of the sanction imposed on the applicant for violation of a rule or 120 days, whichever is greater. The bill identifies circumstances relating to use of an available resource under which just cause must be found.

- This bill is arbitrary and does not take into account real life situations. It also does not take into account the wide-ranging interpretation of just cause. Understanding available resources can be challenging within a convoluted system. Arbitrary punishment with life or death consequences is harsh and dangerous. We should trust our public officials and allow them to assess presenting situations and determine need.

LD 1037 – An Act to Establish a 180-day Residency Requirement for Welfare Benefits. This bill establishes a 180-day residency requirement for applicants for the MaineCare program, the statewide food supplement program, the Temporary Assistance for Needy Families program and municipal general assistance.

- This bill establishes an arbitrary residency requirement when it is legal for a person to move from one town or state to another. Putting people into a half-year punishment sequence is not helpful to stability or independence. It is counterproductive. It would be more practical for neighboring communities to have the latitude to work together to determine the best geographical solution for applicants. These partnerships already exist in some municipalities and it has proven to be an effective strategy, both for the individuals and the GA programs.

It helps none of us to keep people in poverty. The safety net is there to keep people alive. Adding punishment and hardships to people experiencing poverty is not helpful to them or to any of us. These bills fail to account for complexities such as mental illness, trauma, language barriers, and barriers to comprehension that effect people who still need to eat and have a place to live. Please vote in opposition to these bills.

Thank you for your consideration.