

May 20, 2015

Senator Eric Brakey, Chair  
Representative Andrew Gattine, Chair  
Joint Standing Committee on Health and Human Services  
Maine State Legislature  
100 State House Station  
Augusta ME 04333

**RE: Testimony in Opposition to LD 1375: An Act To Increase Accountability in Maine's Welfare Programs**

Senator Brakey, Representative Gattine, distinguished members of the Joint Standing Committee on Health and Human Services,

The Maine Center for Economic Policy (MECEP) opposes LD 1375, *An Act To Increase Accountability in Maine's Welfare Programs*. We oppose this bill for many reasons.

We oppose the elimination of the TANF good cause provision, which will endanger thousands of children when parents for very legitimate reasons are unable to work for a day and are disqualified for further benefits.

We oppose the upfront work search requirement for TANF, which does nothing to address the barriers to employment that are legitimately preventing some families from being able to become employed.

We oppose the restrictions related to the use of EBT cards when there is no evidence of significant fraud or abuse of EBT cards.

We oppose the tougher sanctions for parents deemed to be out of compliance with program rules that provide for no reinstatement even when the family comes into compliance.

We oppose the degrading of Maine families' due process rights by eliminating certain protections in current law that are required before a TANF parent is sanctioned.

All of these provisions will subject Maine families to deeper hunger and homelessness.

But of all the provisions of LD 1375, MECEP is most concerned with the changes to the Parents as Scholars (PaS) program, which would effectively preclude parents from participating because of onerous work participation requirements.

Currently PaS allows parents who receive TANF to obtain a two- or four-year college degree by counting time spent in college classes as work for purposes of meeting the TANF work requirement. LD 1375 would require that parents who go to college while receiving TANF benefits also work or volunteer 20 or 30 hours per week in addition to attending school full time. This is neither reasonable nor humane, especially for single parents.

We know that Maine has over 200,000 adults who started college but did not complete their degree.<sup>1</sup> We also know that the most common reason cited for college non-completion is the obligations that raising children impose.<sup>2</sup> Maine's economic future will continue to stagnate if we do nothing to help these parents go back to school and gain the credentials our employers desperately need to fill existing job vacancies.

PaS is a real success in Maine. Graduates of PaS, mostly single mothers with children, have lifted their families out of poverty by securing better-paying and more secure employment with benefits. A longitudinal study demonstrates that nine out of ten PaS graduates tied positive changes in their economic status to their participation – including home ownership, improved family finances, and promotions at work, as well as better academic outcomes for children.<sup>3</sup>

We can no longer ignore that what is bad for our low-income families is also bad for the rest of Maine. The data are clear. States with lower levels of education have higher rates of unemployment and poverty.<sup>4</sup>

Cutting the PaS program only contributes to Maine's economic woes. It relegates hundreds of parents to living in poverty, while at the same time, it leaves employers without the skilled workforce they need, prevents businesses from expanding, and stunts our state's economic growth.

I urge you to oppose LD 1375. Thank you for your consideration.

Sincerely,



Garrett Martin  
Executive Director

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<sup>1</sup> Working Poor Families Project analysis of 2013 American Community Survey data.

<sup>2</sup> Survey of Maine Citizens Who Have Not Attained a College Degree. Strategic Marketing Services for the Maine Community College System, April 2006.

<sup>3</sup> Butler, Sandra S. and Luisa S. Deprez. Maine Policy Review. "The Parents as Scholars Program: A Maine Success Story," Volume 17, Issue 1, 2008.

<sup>4</sup> Johnson, Joel. The State of Working Maine. Maine Center for Economic Policy: Augusta, ME, November 2013.