



# MAINE EQUAL JUSTICE

## Our View: Most of the easy answers on welfare are wrong

Portland Press Herald,  
Oct. 6, 2014

*“Welfare opponents say that poverty is too comfortable in Maine, and people who get government assistance choose to take it easy rather than take responsibility for their lives. But nearly a quarter of all Mainers who are living below or precariously close to the poverty line will tell you that it is a suffocating and demoralizing existence. They are not choosing an easy path; they just can’t see a way out.*”

*That’s why debate over welfare reform should be about helping people, instead of blaming them. It is a complicated set of problems with no easy solutions, but talking about the best way to bring training and job opportunities to struggling Mainers would be a good place to start.*

*... Poverty has a lot more to do with increasing costs, stagnant incomes and a flaccid job market than bad judgment and a lack of personal responsibility. And the discussion about welfare has to move past why people are on government assistance to how they can get off it.”*

## Building Bridges to a Better Future for Every Mainer

In the summer of 2014, Maine Equal Justice Partners and the Every Child Matters Education Fund went directly to Maine people to ask their thoughts about poverty. We utilized two different approaches to assess their opinions. The first was a telephone survey of **478 likely Maine voters**. The second was a written survey, completed by **941 Maine residents with low income** over the age of 18.

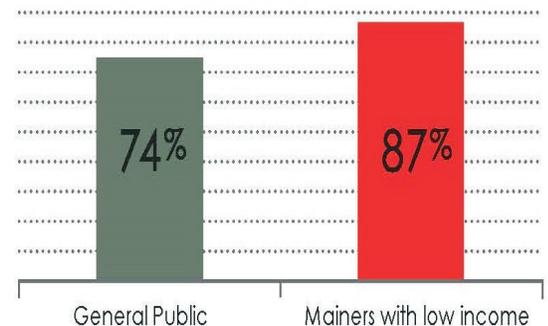
We asked both groups similar questions about the causes of poverty and how to reduce it. What we learned is that the two groups shared common ground - with striking agreement among conservatives and liberals, men and women, and people of all ages and income levels.

The majority of the general public and of people living with low incomes understand that poverty is the result of a lack of opportunity and the economy as a whole.

Further, by large margins Maine people agree about the best ways to reduce poverty. They support solutions such as:

- raising the minimum wage;
- expanding access to affordable health care, higher education and child care;
- promoting tax credits for working families; and
- reducing Maine’s unacceptably high rate of hunger.

**Agree That Inadequate Economic Performance Is The Primary Cause Of Poverty**



Mainers are interested in strategies that increase opportunities to reduce poverty, not in fixing blame. They are interested in solutions that create pathways for families to leave poverty behind.

To read the report, Maine People Agree: Opportunity is the Bridge to a Better Future, go to [http://www.mejp.org/sites/default/files/Poverty-Report-Oct-2014\\_0.pdf](http://www.mejp.org/sites/default/files/Poverty-Report-Oct-2014_0.pdf).

## The Stories Behind the Statistics

*"It's very discouraging to try so hard every day and never be able to get ahead."*

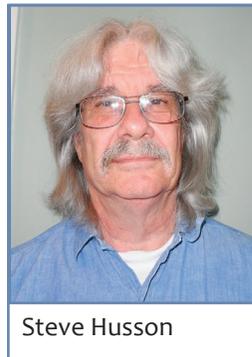
Laurie is a single mom from Down East who worked hard to get a college degree in mental health and human services. Today her work is helping others and she brings a deep understanding of what it means to live in hard times to that work. Laurie knows how it feels when you can't pay the rent on full time wages. She understands the stress of driving an uninspected vehicle because you can't afford to fix it.



Laurie Greene

*"With the financial struggles we are having I can't see how anyone in Maine could get by on near or minimum wage. It's impossible" - Steve Husson*

Steve is in his early 60s and lives with his family in Penobscot County. For years Steve had a good job, but the company he worked for moved offshore. Now he works nights. His wife has a full time job too. They struggle to get by. Steve and his wife were able to scrape by until last November when his son and his family couldn't find work, became homeless and Steve and his wife took them in.



Steve Husson

*"Parents as Scholars (PaS) is an invaluable program that enables individuals an opportunity to be self-supporting. I'm living-proof. I am a PaS graduate and for the last seven years I have had NO government assistance."*

Rochelle is a single mom living in Androscoggin County who worked her way through college with the help of the Parents as Scholars program. Parents as Scholars has had documented success in helping people with low income to obtain a college degree and improve their lives. Rochelle now works as a project manager for a small business.



Rochelle Riordan

**Maine people want to change the conversation. They are interested in constructive dialogue focusing on solutions to poverty, not in continuing the harsh rhetoric that blames people for their circumstances.**

**Maine Equal Justice is ready to have that conversation. Let's focus on evidence-based solutions that build bridges to opportunities for all Maine people.**

## Poverty Facts in Maine

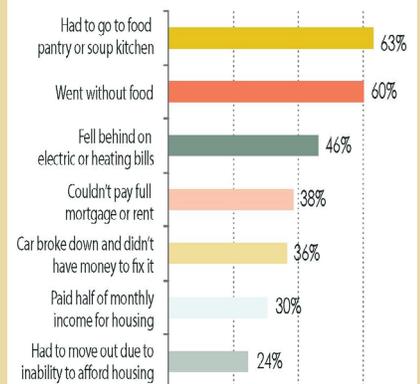
- **More Maine people are working than in 2010, but more of those workers are living in poverty.**

Between 2010 and 2013, the percentage of Maine people working full time but still living in poverty grew faster –11% faster – than the percentage of all people who got jobs in Maine.

- **One out of five children under the age of five is living in poverty in Maine.**

### What we learned through the survey:

#### Experiences of Hardship Among Mainers with Low Income in the Last 12 Months



#### Maine Equal Justice Partners

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