

Annual Report 2013

MAINE
EQUAL



JUSTICE
PARTNERS

Finding solutions to poverty and improving the lives of
people with low income in Maine

Raising Our Voices for Justice

In its 18-year history, Maine Equal Justice Partners has remained true to its mission – to find solutions to poverty and improve the lives of people living in or near poverty in Maine. We are dedicated to improving and strengthening programs that help hardworking Mainers move from crisis to economic stability.

What we do, how we do it and why is best illustrated through the stories of people we work with day in and day out – people who have raised their voice and taken steps to improve their lives and those of others, despite the obstacles in front of them. The road to change is not always easy and victory is rarely immediate. We honor the courage of those who speak out and the resilience and determination of so many more.

The Long Road to a Place to Call Home

Successful Litigation Leads to New Beginnings

Jake Van Meter, age 29, might be a familiar name to many of you; we told you about him in our 2011 annual report. More recently, the latest chapter in his journey to greater independence received press coverage this November. Jake has cerebral palsy, which limits his speech and motor skills. Although he needs assistance with many of his daily activities, he wanted the opportunity to live in his community and not be confined to a nursing home.

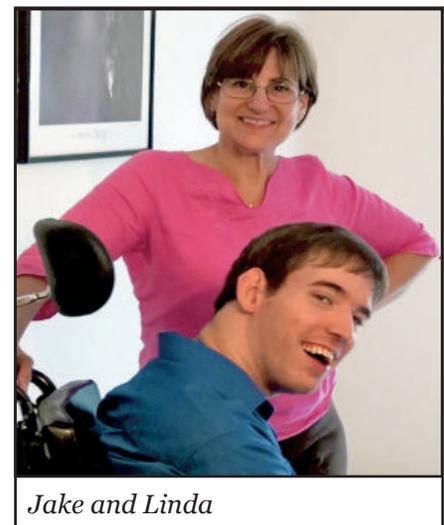
Maine Equal Justice first learned about Jake in 2008 when his Mom, Linda, contacted our office.

He was in a nursing home where I worked. All of Jake's health needs were being met but, psychosocially, he had no interaction with people in his age group. He wanted to explore other options, but we discovered there weren't other options. That was when I just started trying to talk to everybody and anybody that I met and thought might be able to give me a different answer.

Jake and Linda teamed up with MEJP and other legal advocates to bring – and win – a class action lawsuit against the state. The settlement, reached in 2011, requires the state to develop a program for

individuals with cerebral palsy, epilepsy and other similar conditions that provides community-based treatment options and enhances their ability to live independently. MEJP has worked with the Maine Department of Health and Human Services (DHHS) since the settlement to develop and implement those services and supports.

In November Jake and Eric, another plaintiff in the lawsuit, moved from nursing facilities to their own apartments in a residence specifically designed for their needs in Bangor. It was the final chapter in a seven-year struggle for independence – and a new beginning for Jake and Eric.



Jake and Linda

I just wanted some kind of housing in the community where he could be with his peers and have more choice in his decisions of daily life.

Linda Elliot
Ellsworth

Maine Compass: Federal Health Insurance Funds Still Available

**Kennebec Journal,
August 31, 2013**
*Excerpts from op ed
by Sara Gagné-Holmes*

Maine has an incredible opportunity to improve the lives of thousands of people, most of whom are working but can't afford to purchase private health insurance.

They work in a broad range of industries, including retail sales, food, health care, education, child care, farming, fishing and logging.

They are the backbone of Maine. They are the ones who would benefit directly from extended access to health insurance.

Maine can extend access to health care by accepting funds set aside by the federal government to insure nearly 70,000 Mainers.

The federal government will pay 100 percent of the cost of covering all newly eligible individuals beginning in 2014 through 2016. The federal share will decline slowly until it reaches 90 percent by 2020.

Extending access to affordable health insurance will create jobs, boost Maine's economy, and make the lives of thousands of hardworking Mainers better and more secure. Maine cannot afford to say no.

Why Medicaid Matters

Samarelli "Sam" Daniels, her husband and two children live in Augusta. The family is currently covered by MaineCare; however, due to eligibility cuts in 2012 Sam and her husband will lose their "parent" coverage in January. Sam prepared testimony for the legislature in April in favor of Medicaid expansion, which would preserve "parent" coverage for her family and thousands of others in Maine.

We've come a long way since being homeless a few years ago. My husband was able to find part time employment and because he's such a good worker, was quickly promoted to Department Manager and full time employment at a local warehouse store. Even though he has a lot of pain in his feet, knees and back, with the treatment he's been receiving through MaineCare, he has been able to continue his 4-mile round trip walk to work each day.

We budget our money very carefully but have absolutely no income to pay for either an insurance premium or to pay for health care costs out of our pocket. It's very frightening to know that if the State doesn't accept the federal funds to cover parents in our income bracket, we will lose our health care coverage.

Since Sam's testimony in April we now know that she and her husband will likely lose their MaineCare coverage because of the Governor's veto of the bill that would permit Maine to expand Medicaid. They may qualify for transitional assistance but, in time, that will go away and Sam and her husband will be uninsured.

It's unnecessary and unacceptable that families such as Sam's live in fear that one illness or injury could lead to financial ruin.

It doesn't have to be this way. Maine has the opportunity to extend health care coverage to close to 70,000 people in 2014.



Sam and family

MaineCare has meant so much to my family—it has made it possible for my husband to stay employed despite his health problems.

**Samarelli Daniels
Augusta**

Why Education Matters

Paving the Way to Economic Security

Isaac Stone lives in Winslow with his wife and two children. In 2007 he was working in direct care at a group home, earning just under \$10 an hour. Today, Isaac is employed as an RN, earning a good salary that supports his family, thanks to the Competitive Skills Scholarship Program (CSSP). With supports that help participants go to school and earn a degree, CSSP provides an opportunity for low-wage workers to gain the necessary skills to succeed in today's economy.

Maine Equal Justice has championed this program since its inception, developing strategies to encourage participation and help participants succeed. Isaac is just one of the many success stories of CSSP. Despite CSSP's proven success, the Governor's budget included substantial cuts to the program this year.

In April, Isaac testified before the legislature in opposition to the proposed cuts, speaking to the benefits of CSSP.

With my past work I was just about able to pay our bills but never get ahead. It was a leap of faith for me to go on to the Community College, but one I needed to take for me and my family. This program made it possible for me to succeed.



Isaac Stone at work

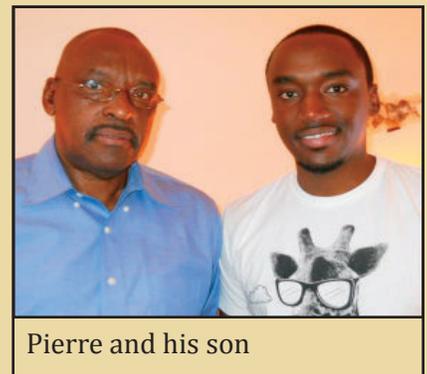
I will always be grateful to the State of Maine for creating the CSSP and am happy to know that some of my tax dollars go to support it. I think if you look beyond today and into the future you'll see how programs like CSSP are short term investments that provide long term benefits.

Defying sound public policy and logic, the program remains under fire. MEJP testified in opposition to proposed rules from the Department of Labor in December. The proposed changes to the program would restrict the amount of time that someone can participate and reduce the critical supports and services that make higher education possible for low-wage workers.

Training and education provide the building blocks for a skilled workforce and a pathway out of poverty; programs such as CSSP are a wise investment for Maine's future.

Preserving the Safety Net for Immigrants

Pierre is an asylum seeker from Rwanda who fled his native country for fear of torture and persecution because of his political beliefs. With MEJP's assistance, Pierre accessed Maine's Supplemental Security Income (SSI) program for immigrants and refugees, which provides income support for aged, blind or disabled individuals who are ineligible for the federal SSI program. At 71 years old Pierre has had serious health problems; the program helps him pay for his rent, utilities, food and medications. The SSI program was slated for elimination in the Governor's proposed budget this year but, thanks to Pierre and many other community members who came to the legislature to testify in opposition to the cut, the program was saved.



Pierre and his son

Because I get help [from the SSI program] I am able to have some peace of mind.... I am only one person but I know there are others like me who also rely on this program. Please oppose elimination of the state SSI program.

Pierre Kayiranga
March 2013

MEJP's Advocacy

Making a Difference for Families in Maine

Gretchen, a single Mom, is a Parents as Scholars (PaS) participant through the Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) program. PaS provides parents who are eligible for TANF with cash assistance and support services while they attend a post-secondary degree program. Gretchen contacted MEJP after receiving a letter from DHHS, informing her that she had been sanctioned for not turning in her school attendance sheets on time. She was told she lacked good cause for being late and, thus, would lose a portion of her food stamps.

MEJP represented Gretchen at a DHHS fair hearing where we proved that Gretchen did, indeed, have good cause. With this finding, the sanction was removed and she was able to keep her full food stamp benefit. Gretchen currently has an internship with Pine Tree Legal Assistance in their Machias office as part of her college program, and has set her sights on graduate school at USM.



Gretchen and her daughter

The help you gave me hasn't been forgotten. You showed me that no mountain is too tall as long as you have support while climbing it. I don't know how to express my gratitude enough except to pay it forward.

**Gretchen Neubelt
Jonesport**

Equal Justice Hero Award 2013

MEJP's 2013 Equal Justice Hero award went to Jennifer Archer, Esq. for her work with MEJP and the ACLU of Maine Foundation on a federal class action case, seeking to restore health care coverage for legal immigrants in Maine. Jen is a partner at Kelly, Rimmel & Zimmerman.



Jennifer Archer receiving award from Jack Comart

A Snapshot of MEJP in Action in 2013

At the State House

Worked on more than 60 different legislative initiatives; conducting legal research, educating legislators on various issues, preparing testimony, and organizing support or opposition, depending on the issue.

With governmental agencies

Advocated for fair public policies and regulations that conform with federal and state law and address the needs of all Maine people.

In the courts

Pursued equal justice for Maine people with low income through three class action cases in federal district court.

Around the state

Conducted more than 50 trainings and workshops, reaching close to 1,500 social service and health care providers and advocates who are now better prepared to assist their clients in navigating the complex web of Maine's safety net programs.

One-on-one

Assisted more than 1,000 individuals and families who called MEJP with questions and concerns about their benefits.



Maine Equal Justice Partners

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