

# Legislative Update 2013

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

With several weeks behind us we can now take stock of the 2013 legislative session. Maine Equal Justice Partners worked on more than 60 different legislative initiatives this session – conducting legal research and advocacy, and organizing support or opposition, depending on the issue. We testified on bills pertaining to health care, housing, income supports, employment, taxes and education. With both victories and defeats for hard-working Mainers, MEJP's advocacy continues as we seek policy solutions that help families gain economic security and leave poverty behind.

## Medicaid expansion: the fight goes on

The 2013 legislative session presented Maine with an historic opportunity to provide health insurance coverage to nearly 70,000 individuals with low income as of January 1, 2014, thanks to the Affordable Care Act (ACA). At the same time the state would have drawn down millions in federal funds that would have served as a much needed stimulus to Maine's economy.

MEJP took the lead in organizing the Cover Maine Now! Coalition, representing more than 85 organizations and businesses that support accepting federal funds to provide health care coverage to more Mainers. The Coalition made the case to legislators, the media and the general public that Medicaid expansion is good for Maine – its people and the economy.

Many of Maine's major newspapers endorsed Medicaid expansion on their editorial pages and called upon the Governor to 'do the right thing'. Public opinion was favorable as well; two separate statewide polls found that more than two thirds of Maine voters supported expanding access to care.



Cover Maine Now! Coalition rallies for health care expansion

## Accepting Federal funds for Medicaid expansion would:

- Provide health insurance to nearly 70,000 Maine people who are uninsured or at risk of losing coverage.
- Stimulate over \$350 million in economic activity by infusing more than \$250 million of additional federal funding into Maine's economy annually.
- Create more than 3,100 jobs here in Maine.
- Generate \$16 to \$18 million in state and local taxes annually.

*Our officers are often called to intervene because people haven't received the medical care they need... without proper care some of these folks can become a danger to themselves and to others. Maine has an opportunity to make a real difference in the lives of thousands of people... The ripple effects will make our communities stronger and safer, save state and local government resources, and ensure that more people get the care they need. That's good for all of us.*

**Edward Googins, Chief of Police - South Portland, Excerpt from testimony in support of Medicaid expansion.**



**Robert and Priscilla Fennel, Albion, Maine**

*“Without this help, neither my husband nor I would have any help with our Medicare Part A and B deductibles, co-insurance and copayments. We would quickly face financial ruin.”*

The Fennels' testimony helped persuade the legislature not to eliminate MaineCare's 'ineligible spouse disregard'.

The campaign was successful – almost. Despite heroic efforts by legislators, advocates and individuals, Governor LePage vetoed this initiative – not once but twice. In the end, the Legislature failed to override the Governor's veto of LD 1066, “An Act to Increase Access to Health Coverage and Qualify Maine for Federal Funding” by the slimmest of margins.

*“We have seen tremendous public support and growing momentum for expanding access to health care, Gagné-Holmes said. Today, we are disappointed because thousands of people will not have access to health coverage. Accepting these funds would have saved lives, created more than \$350 million in economic activity, created 3,100 jobs and prevented potential tax penalties for large employers.”*

**From Cover Maine Now!'s press release on June 19, 2013**

Although the end result of the session was a setback, the campaign goes on. The Cover Maine Now! coalition continues to advocate for accepting federal funds to expand access to care. We intend to make access to health care a reality for the nearly 70,000 people who would benefit from this coverage.

## **An imperfect budget - but some victories for Maine's most vulnerable**

In January the Governor proposed a state budget for the next two years that included yet another round of significant cuts to programs that help people with low income. Fortunately, the Legislature recognized the negative impact these cuts would create. Most of the proposed cuts to MaineCare, prescription drug programs, General Assistance and income support for older immigrants and immigrants with disabilities were defeated. For the first time in several years there is even a bit of good news for families with low income, as some families receiving TANF (Temporary Assistance for Needy Families) will see a \$100 increase in their “housing special need payment”.

Maine's “circuit-breaker” (property tax relief) program did not fare as well. The Governor's original proposal would have limited the program to those ages 65 and older. Instead the Legislature replaced it with the “Property Tax Fairness Program.” Although people under age 65 will remain eligible for some tax relief, its benefits and eligibility levels will be lower than under the former program. The good news is that when this new program begins in January 2014, people will be able to apply for it when they file their income taxes, and non-income tax filers will be able to apply through the Department of Health and Human Services.

The Competitive Skills Scholarship Program also experienced a loss of funding in the final budget. This program is administered by the Maine Department of Labor and gives eligible people with low income (below 200% of the federal poverty level) a chance to go to college or earn a certificate or degree. At the end of the budget process this cut was not as deep as it appeared it might be at various times during the legislative session, so the program will continue.

The legislative session began with a powerful public hearing on the Governor's proposed budget. Dozens of seniors, people with disabilities, families trying to make ends meet, new Mainers and their allies came to the State House and made a strong case to reject these harmful cuts. For days after the public hearing legislators commented on the compelling and poignant testimony. Those stories made the difference in protecting critical programs.

The Appropriations Committee worked night and day to find common ground; its members agreed to a plan that balanced the state's budget and rejected the Governor's most harmful proposals. The full legislature approved the Committee's revised budget and then came together at the end of June to override the Governor's veto by more than a 2/3<sup>rd</sup>s margin.

At the end of the day, **the voices of Maine people were heard.** MEJP recognizes the many individuals who helped prevent some of the most perilous cuts, with their participation in the hearings, testimony and calls to their legislator. Thank you!



Madysen (center) with her grandmother, Kandie Desell, and Speaker of the House Mark Eves

Madysen told legislators how important it is for people like her Mom to be able to get dental care.

*“If she loses her teeth she won’t want to smile anymore. It will be harder for her to find work or to feel good about herself. When parents are hurting, it makes life harder for them and for their children. Please help change this.”*

## Maine People Speak Out at the Legislature

*“Back in 2007 I was working in direct care at a group home earning just under \$10 per hour. Today I’m employed as an RN and earning \$55,000 a year thanks to the Competitive Skills Scholarship Program. My family has private insurance through my employer and we no longer have to rely on public assistance benefits to get by.*

**Isaac Stone, Winslow, Maine, Excerpt from testimony in opposition to proposed cuts to the Competitive Skills Scholarship Program**



Judith Busby, Exeter, Maine

*“By May 2012 we had no means at all to pay our mortgage or utilities; we had exhausted all of our options and were facing potential homelessness. Thankfully, it was then that I learned about the state’s SSI program for immigrants. I qualified for help last June.”*

Judith Busby, speaking in opposition to the elimination of the state-funded SSI program for immigrants.

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## Maine Equal Justice in the news - 2013

### **Kennebec Journal**, *LePage budget proposal: Blueprint or massive tax shift?* 1/12/13

Sara Gagne Holmes, executive director of Maine Equal Justice Partners, an advocacy group for low-income Mainers, said the cuts would affect more than the poor and elderly. “The governor and the administration have made choices, and those choices have led to the budget deficit,” she said. “And now he’s using that deficit to justify significant cuts to a majority of Maine people that will result in significant harm.”

### **Boston Globe**, *44,000 to lose Medicaid coverage in Maine.* 2/23/13

“We’re using stereotypes, rhetoric, and ideology to create public policy and that’s always easier and resonates more than looking at the facts,” said Sara Gagné-Holmes. In an effort to block the cuts, [MEJP], on behalf of the Bourgoins and others, filed a lawsuit this week against the Obama administration for signing off on LePage’s policy.

### **Kennebec Journal**, *Report: Federal health care funds would help Maine.* 3/12/13

“If Maine accepts the federal funds available under the Affordable Care Act, then we can cover more people and save money by providing preventive services and reducing the cost associated with treating uninsured people in emergency rooms,” Gagné-Holmes said.

### **Bangor Daily News**, *Rally urges state to accept federal money to expand MaineCare.* 3/21/13

Organized by Cover Maine Now, a coalition of 78 groups including business, nonprofits, faith-based groups and civic organizations, the rally ... urged lawmakers to accept federal money to expand the MaineCare program. The move would make health coverage available to an additional 69,500 people, including 24,500 parents and childless adults due to lose coverage in 2014, according to a recent report by the advocacy group Maine Equal Justice Partners and the Maine Center for Economic Policy.

### **Portland Press Herald**, *Lewiston kicks 84 people off welfare rolls.* 3/26/13

Robyn Merrill, a senior policy analyst at the Maine Equal Justice Partners, which advocates for low-income Mainers, said her group opposes LePage’s cut because it would impose arbitrary limits on assistance, rather than weigh actual needs. Merrill said the rhetoric around fraud accusations is troubling because it has the potential to unfairly tar the thousands of deserving people who benefit from the program.

“By no means do we condone fraud, but it is concerning seeing some of the messaging around this story,” Merrill said. “In truth, the vast majority of people who access General Assistance genuinely need the help.”

### **Kennebec Journal**, *Bill seeks to ensure welfare clients are prepared for long-term employment.* 5/3/13

House Speaker Mark Eves said job screening assessments were more important since Gov. Paul LePage enacted a provision that limits Temporary Assistance for Needy Families to 60 months. The limit was implemented in June 2012. A University of Maine study commissioned by Maine Equal Justice Partners said the limit had resulted in 1,500 families, including approximately 2,700 children, losing assistance.

### **Kennebec Journal**, *Mainers fall into Medicaid loophole.* 6/23/13

“(Medicaid expansion) was the foundation upon which the exchanges were built,” explained Sara Gagne-Holmes, executive director of Maine Equal Justice Partners, a health care advocacy group that supported Medicaid expansion. But a 2012 U.S. Supreme Court decision, while upholding President Obama’s signature health care law, allowed states to opt out of the Medicaid expansion. After a lengthy struggle in Augusta, Maine is one of the states opting out.