

Summer Update 2014

MAINE
EQUAL



JUSTICE
PARTNERS

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

Legislative Testimony: Making the Difference

...TANF gave me the security I needed to leave an abusive relationship. Knowing that I'd have enough income to pay rent and that I'd have child care when I found work gave me the confidence I needed to make my life and the life of my son better.

I urge you not to add additional hurdles to people in their attempt to escape domestic violence. It's already a very difficult decision to make and programs like TANF are one of the few lifelines that allow people to believe there might be an alternative.

Rachel, former
TANF recipient – Eustis

... The Parents as Scholars program played a critical role in helping me get through college while also working as much as I could. The assistance in paying for child care and emergency vehicle repairs made all the difference in me being able to reach my goals. We no longer receive public assistance but are extremely grateful for the help when we needed it. Today I have stable employment and my son is doing well in school and other areas of his life.

Thea, UMaine
Presque Isle graduate - Eddington

Reason and Compassion Prevail in 'Welfare' Debate

As we savor the remaining days of the Maine summer, we begin this Update with a rather sobering picture. Maine families have been losing ground these past few years. The overall poverty rate in Maine has increased and one in five Maine children is living in poverty. More families are going hungry and homelessness has been on the rise.

Despite these facts, the governor introduced several bills under the guise of 'reform' that would have undermined and reduced critical supports for Maine families in need.

We are pleased to report, however, that the facts and reason prevailed. The 2014 Legislature rejected these proposals:

- Elimination of the 'good cause' provision in the Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) program, which permits some participants to be excused from work requirements while they are disabled, caring for a child who is ill or disabled, or experiencing domestic violence;

- Elimination of the Parents as Scholars (PaS) program, which has a well-documented record of helping parents leave TANF behind by providing them with access to higher education that in turn allows them to earn a livable wage;
- Up-front job search as prerequisite for TANF eligibility. This requirement would have undermined a new assessment process, approved by the legislature last year, that helps TANF families find and keep a job; and
- New restrictions on the use of Electronic Benefit Transfer (EBT) cards.

The strong testimony of MAIN members, women's and religious groups, and community advocates, and the hard work of legislative allies made all the difference in defeating these bills.

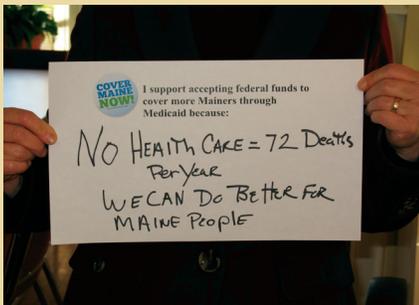
Maine Equal Justice is committed to making real improvements in our safety net programs – changes that are based on data and evidence of what works in reducing poverty. We need to provide a pathway so that working families can leave poverty behind.

Maine People Speak out in Support of Medicaid Expansion

I've served in the U.S. Air Force for 23 years, paid my taxes and performed the hardest job of all – taking care of an elderly parent with Alzheimer's. Now I'm in a position of needing help...

Without insurance I and others like me are living in fear of not being able to get care that will allow us to be healthy and move forward.

Margaret, Portland



I wish I could afford health insurance. Even with a subsidy in the Marketplace, I can't do it on my income as a baker. Access to health care would give me some real security. It would allow me to keep doing what needs to be done—caring for my family, going to work and volunteering in my community.

Christian, Bangor

Closing the Gap: Efforts to Accept Federal Funds to Expand Medicaid Continue

Despite the extraordinary efforts of the 100-plus member Cover Maine Now (CMN) Coalition and other allies, and broad public support, our greatest disappointment of the 2014 legislative session was the failure to achieve Medicaid expansion.

Although the Legislature, in fact, successfully enacted three separate pieces of legislation to accept federal funds to expand Medicaid, and dedicated significant time and effort to find a bipartisan compromise, the governor vetoed each bill. In each case the Legislature fell just a few votes short of two-thirds, the number needed to override the veto.

The direct impact of the governor's veto is that 69,500 Maine people with income below 138 percent of the federal poverty level (\$16,105/yr for one person; \$27,311/yr for a family of three) will not have access to Medicaid coverage made available through the Affordable Care Act (ACA) and will continue to struggle to get the health care they need. In addition, nearly 32,000 of these individuals have no access to subsidized coverage through the Marketplace; subsidies are only available to people with income between 100 and 400 percent of the federal poverty level.

Maine Equal Justice and the CMN Coalition remain committed to achieving Medicaid expansion in Maine. The benefits for the state are many:

- 69,500 Maine people with low income would be insured, including about 3,000 veterans and 1,000 of their family members, individuals with disabilities, working parents and other low-income adults
- 3,100 to 3,400 jobs would be created throughout Maine
- \$256 million in additional federal dollars would come to Maine in each of the next two years
- \$500 million in additional economic activity would result each year
- Hospitals and health centers would see an increase in revenues and a reduction in the number of uninsured people seeking care

Accepting federal funds is still a good deal for Maine. To learn more, visit the Cover Maine Now! website:

www.covermainenow.com

General Assistance for New Mainers: Fighting for Fairness

Maine's General Assistance (GA) program has never imposed citizenship requirements. It is solely a needs-based voucher program of last resort administered by the state and municipalities, and everyone has the right to apply. In December 2013 the Department of Health and Human Services issued a proposed rule that would have barred certain non-citizens from obtaining GA. This would have impacted people without documentation, some asylum applicants, and other groups of immigrants who reside here lawfully.

Thousands of Maine people joined forces to oppose the proposal; more than 100 people – new Mainers, elected officials, faith leaders, health care workers, teachers, social workers and others - participated in the public hearing on the rule in January and thousands more signed a petition to DHHS, opposing the rule. In May the Attorney General advised DHHS that the proposed rule could not be implemented because it:

- violated the Equal Protection Clause of the Maine and U.S. Constitutions;
- presented an unfunded mandate for municipalities; and
- Exceeded DHHS authority.

Despite the AG's finding, the governor and DHHS decided to proceed with a modified version of the rule that would actually impact more immigrants than the original proposal. They have informed Maine cities and towns that the state will not provide funds for General Assistance to these individuals. Further, the governor has said that he will withhold all state reimbursement for GA if a municipality ignores the administration's new guideline.

This issue is now in court; the Maine Municipal Association and several municipalities have filed a lawsuit against DHHS, questioning the legality of the administration's directive. MEJP and the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU) of Maine have filed for intervenor status in the suit on behalf of two asylum seekers – two women from Burundi - who will be affected by the outcome.

Asylum seekers: a long uncertain road to safety and security

Rehma Rebecca Juma, age 19, fled her native Burundi without her family in 2013 due to her life being placed at risk. She attends high school in Portland and is working hard to gain proficiency in English. Without GA, she would be homeless and very likely unable to complete her education.



Suavis Furaha and her family

Suavis Furaha, also from Burundi, fled political persecution with her four school-age children. Furaha has applied for asylum but until she waits the required 180 days for work authorization she is legally unable to work. She is studying English at Westbrook Adult Ed; her children attend public school there. Furaha and her family have no other source of income or financial assistance other than GA at this time. Without this help they would likely lose their apartment.

Good News: The Property Tax Fairness Credit Will Help More People

Today too many Maine people struggle to keep up with rising property taxes that take a large bite out of their income. Renters are also increasingly paying a larger share of their income to keep a roof over their heads. This made the loss of the Maine Residents Property Tax and Rent Refund program (also known as Circuit Breaker) in 2013 all the more painful for the tax-burdened households that relied on it.

The Circuit Breaker program was replaced by the Property Tax Fairness Credit (PTFC) in 2013. This new program limited who was eligible and significantly reduced the available credit, resulting in many people losing significant help with property taxes and rent.

The good news is that MEJP and its allies successfully advocated in the Legislature this year to restructure the program so that it will now provide more help to more Mainers. Funds will be better targeted to help families with the least ability to pay their property tax and rent bills. The revised program increases the credit for lower-income residents younger than 65 from \$300 to \$600 and from \$400 to \$900 for tax filers 65 and older. It also expands eligibility to more renters. Seniors in subsidized housing will regain some of the help they used to receive from Circuit Breaker.

The credit increase will apply to property taxes paid in 2014. Mainers can apply for the credit on their state income tax return in early 2015.

These changes to the PTFC represent a step in the right direction. While they do not restore all that was lost when Circuit Breaker was eliminated, they will provide much more relief to thousands more Maine people who truly need it.

9th Annual Maine Advocacy Conference

Tuesday, October 14, 2014

Augusta Civic Center

For advocates working throughout the State of Maine

For more information or to receive a conference brochure, please contact Crystal Bond at cbond@mejp.org or 626-7058, ext. 205.

Recent Awards and Accolades for the MEJP Team

**Maine People's Alliance
Rising Tide Award 2014**
Maine Equal Justice Partners
for its leadership and vision

**National Association of Social
Workers – Maine Chapter
2014 Agency of the Year**
Maine Equal Justice Partners
*for their fierce advocacy before
the Maine Legislature, for
Maine's low-income people*

**Kennebec Behavioral Health
2014 Outstanding
Community Partnership
Award**
Maine Equal Justice Partners

**Western Maine Labor Council
2014 Frances Perkins Award**
to Christine Hastedt
*In recognition of your tireless
leadership, passion and fight for
the working people of Maine*



Christine Hastedt accepting Outstanding Community Dedication award from Kandie Desell, leader of the Maine Association of Interdependent Neighborhoods (MAIN)

MAINE EQUAL JUSTICE

126 Sewall Street, Augusta, Maine 04330-6822
Voice/TTY: (207) 626-7058 ~ Fax: (207) 621-8148
Email: info@mejp.org ~ Web: www.mejp.org