

Testimony to the Joint Standing Committee on Health and Human Services

Regarding LD 390, The Biennial Budget

By Nicole Evans, United Way of Greater Portland

March 2, 2017

Senator Brakey, Representative Hymanson, and members of the Joint Standing Committee on Health and Human Services, my name is Nicole Evans and I am presenting testimony on behalf of United Way of Androscoggin County, United Way of Aroostook County, United Way of Eastern Maine, United Way of Greater Portland, United Way of Mid-Maine, and United Way of York County (“United Way”) regarding LD 390, “An Act Making Unified Appropriations and Allocations for the Expenditures of State Government, General Fund and Other Funds and Changing Certain Provisions of the Law Necessary to the Proper Operations of State Government for the Fiscal Years Ending June 30, 2018 and June 30, 2019.” We oppose the proposed elimination of General Assistance (GA) and changing eligibility requirements for programs such as Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF), the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), and Social Security Income (SSI). These changes will dramatically impact individuals and families in crisis, and create a greater financial strain on property owners and businesses across our state.

We recognize that you and your colleagues face difficult decisions in passing a biennial budget as well as in evaluating several public policy priorities worthy of consideration. We strongly believe that investments in our most vulnerable neighbors today will result in stronger education, financial stability, and health outcomes tomorrow.

In 2014, income support programs including GA, TANF, SNAP, and SSI, reduced poverty in Maine by 17.9%, lifting 236,000 Maine people above the poverty line – the largest increase in New England.¹ Without these income supports, Maine people will fall deeper into poverty and reduce Maine’s chances for a strong economic future.

General Assistance

The proposed cuts in Part ZZZ of the budget would repeal GA in its entirety, imposing high human and economic costs across the state that will prevent people in crisis from getting the assistance they need. United Way is very concerned about this prospect.

GA is a program that provides life-saving assistance to people in need. It is a program of last resort because recipients must make a good faith effort to secure other resources before they can receive assistance;² however, it is one of the few places individuals and families can turn when experiencing a crisis. In fact, most assistance is used for shelter and food, and for the vast majority of recipients, GA is received for a short time. Unfortunately, too many individuals and families are in crisis.

¹ “Safety Net More Effective Against Poverty Than Previously Thought.” Center on Budget and Policy Priorities, May 2015. www.cbpp.org/sites/default/files/atoms/files/5-6-15pov.pdf.

² 22 M.R.S. § 4317.

For example, in Fiscal Year 2015, Portland provided direct financial assistance to 4,341 qualified individuals and families, and an additional 3,194 in individual shelter payments – with 90.6% of GA assistance providing food and shelter. On any given night in Portland, there are 443 people who are homeless.³ If GA is eliminated, it is very likely that more individuals, in Portland and across the state, will become homeless.

United Way is a committed partner in alleviating poverty and homelessness. The services we help fund, however, cannot replace a public commitment to serving people in need. GA is a state/municipal partnership that works. These negative outcomes can be avoided. We ask you to reject this proposal and continue the General Assistance program.

TANF Program Changes

TANF is only available to families with children, and provides critical assistance for low-income working Maine parents. Families struggling to get out of poverty face multiple significant barriers to employment, including higher than average rates of domestic violence, lack of safe, affordable child care, transportation, disability, lack of education or job skills and limited educational or training opportunities.⁴ Due to the multiple barriers faced by Maine parents in need of temporary assistance, TANF policies should facilitate and reward an individual's pursuit of employment and education, and help them access community resources that can help them build a path to stability.

However, Part FFFF of the budget proposes to reduce the lifetime TANF limit from five to three years, creates a pre-eligibility job readiness requirement, expands full family sanction, repeals almost all good-cause exemptions from work requirements, and makes it extremely difficult to access the Parents as Scholars programs. These proposals harm the parents and children that TANF is designed to assist.

The proposed changes, collectively, will make it more difficult for struggling families to get out of poverty. For these reasons, we urge you to reject the proposed budget changes to the TANF program.

GA, TANF, SNAP, and SSI for Certain Non-Citizens

We are also deeply concerned about the proposed changes in Part HHHH of the budget that would eliminate eligibility for individuals who legally reside in the United States, but who are not U.S. citizens, from qualifying for critical GA, TANF, SNAP, and SSI support. These individuals – children, seniors, individuals with disabilities, victims of domestic violence, people struggling with mental illness or substance use disorder, and those waiting for work authorization or asylum determinations from the federal government – will lose the basic safeguards to protect themselves from cold, hunger, homelessness, and sickness.

³ <http://www.portlandmaine.gov/ArchiveCenter/ViewFile/Item/761>

⁴ "Opening Doors: Federal Strategic Plan to Prevent and End Homelessness." The United States Interagency Council on Homelessness, June 2015.

http://usich.gov/resources/uploads/asset_library/USICH_OpeningDoors_Amendment2015_FINAL.pdf.

New Mainers bring with them the drive and capability to grow and strengthen Maine's economy.⁵ Unfortunately, obstacles such as an inability to transfer educational credentials and language barriers stall their progress, often creating a need to access short-term support while they navigate our complex systems and policies in order to become Maine's newest tax paying citizens. If GA, TANF, SNAP and SSI supports for asylum seekers are cut, many of these lawfully present New Mainers will have few places left to turn.

We believe that New Mainers are an asset for our state. These individuals and their families are a critical part of the solution to our long-term demographic challenge. For these reasons, we ask you to once again reject this counterproductive proposal.

Thank you for your time, leadership and service.

⁵ Economic Policy Institute. <http://www.epi.org/publication/immigration-facts/>