



Rooted in the Hebrew and Christian scriptures, the mission of the Maine Council of Churches is to inspire congregations and people of faith to unite in good works that build a culture of justice, compassion and peace.

"SEEKING COMMON GROUND, WORKING FOR THE COMMON GOOD"

Testimony of Rev. Jill Saxby in Support of:

- **LD 1039, Resolve, to Create a Working Group to Make Recommendations to Improve the Efficiency, Accountability and Proper Administration of Municipal General Assistance Programs; and**
- **LD1431, An Act to Establish Standards for the Administration of General Assistance Programs;**
- **LD 1001, An Act to Assist Persons Who May Be Eligible for Social Security Disability Assistance**

And in Opposition to:

- **LD 1370, An Act to Amend the Laws Governing General Assistance Programs; and**
- **LD 539, An Act to Build Accountability into the General Assistance Laws**
- **LD 193, An Act To Require an Applicant for State Assistance To Show Proof of Legal Residence in the United States and Proof of Residency for at Least the Previous 90 Days in This State**
- **LD 1294, An Act To Impose a 90-day Residency Requirement in Order To Receive State Assistance**

Good afternoon Senator McCormick, Representative Strang Burgess and members of the Health and Human Services Committee. I am Rev. Jill Saxby and I'm here today representing the Maine Council of Churches and its nine member denominations.

Let me be clear that we're here today to speak, because we feel we must, from out of our shared moral values, rooted in the Christian tradition. It would be hard not to speak up in this way today, just two days after Christians around the world celebrated Easter. According to Scripture, just before his arrest and trial, Jesus told his followers that the day would come when the Son of Man would welcome and embrace those who had fed him when he was hungry, welcomed him when he was a stranger, took care of him when he was sick. The people were perplexed, and asked, "when did we do those things?" Jesus' reply is what guides our response to the bills before you today: "Truly I tell you, just as you did to one of the least of these – *who are members of my family* – so you did to me."

In our view, a time of increasing hunger in Maine is not the time to put more barriers between basic help and those who are hungry, thirsty, in need of welcome and shelter. Residency requirements, extended disqualification times and new, undefined "just cause" standards for abandoning a resource might reduce the caseload but they will *not* reduce human need, nor our moral obligation to meet that need. We believe our public policy should begin with the idea that all human beings are more than isolated economic units in an endless competition for shrinking resources. Put simply, we believe that from a moral point of view people in need of this help are family and ought to be treated as such. Meeting that standard is how we ought to measure our success.

The churches in Maine will do their best to meet the widening gap between need and public assistance, even in an era when our own resources are shrinking. But in a free democracy, only a system of public benefits provides for both broad-based participation and public accountability.

The current system is not perfect. That is why the Council supports establishing a working group to recommend ways of improving the system, assisting people to get SSI disability if that makes more sense for their situation and establishing better standards, practices and data collection for GA . Our own inquiries have shown us that GA is not administered equitably across municipalities.

In my personal experience, when I was serving in local parishes, I would see people show up at my door all the time, physically and emotionally exhausted from the run-around and stress of applying for help from various public and private sources. It is exhausting to be poor, even more stressful if you have children. Let's not make it more debilitating. Let's work together to figure out how to serve people better. Let's approach this legislation as though our own brothers or sisters, children or grandchildren were going to be directly affected by it.

Fortunately, we've also learned at the Council that when local faith leaders and GA officers work collaboratively, sharing the goal of connecting people to the right resources, both GA and private charity work better to serve those in need and therefore the whole community. We can improve the system by working together to serve those Mainers -- those members of our family -- who are most in need. The Maine Council of Churches would be eager to participate in such an effort.

Thank you for considering our views.