

For people of faith, the most important question to be answered when confronted with the facts of poverty in Maine is, simply, “how are we called in this moment to love and serve our neighbor?”

Contrary to the myths of me-first consumerism, fear of the stranger and blaming “the other,” we have the Great Story of God’s love for us that knows no bounds, a love that calls us to love our neighbors as ourselves. We believe that even as we work together to improve the economy of Maine, we cannot afford to ignore the moral economy that, in the long run, is the basis for our quality of life in community.

The first step is to tell the truth: too many Mainers are suffering from poverty and lack of opportunity. The next step is to ask: what must change -- in ourselves and in our collective response -- to meet the challenges we face now.

In these tough times our safety net programs are more important than ever.

They help put food on the table for hungry children and keep families warm during Maine winters. They provide working families with critical services like health care for their children and medications for their parents and grandparents.

But...today’s conversation about “welfare” is too often driven by anecdotes and stereotypes, taking the stories of a few and unfairly generalizing them to all poor families.

There’s a lot at stake when we talk about welfare reform. We have the responsibility to make careful policy decisions—and these decisions should be based on facts.

- One in nine Maine people lives below the federal poverty level, which amounts to an annual income of \$18,530 a year for a family of three.
- One in every six Maine children lives in poverty.
- Maine has the 2nd highest rate of “very low food security” in the nation.

When people talk about “welfare” they are usually talking about the Temporary Assistance for Needy Families program, or TANF. TANF provides financial assistance to over 25,000 Maine children and their

families as they struggle to make ends meet during tough times. Ninety-two percent of recipients are women, reflecting the large majority of TANF families headed by women raising young children on their own—the median age of a child receiving TANF is just two years old.

The Truth About Public Assistance...

Some people say that public assistance programs foster dependency and complacency. The fact is that most families get help from TANF for a short amount of time - the median length of time on the program is only 18 months. And 97% of recipients have work experience, having worked an average of three jobs in the past five years.

And people are not moving to Maine for our generous public benefits. The fact is that the maximum TANF benefit is not overly generous - a family of 3 in Maine receives a maximum of \$485 per month, which is only 32% of the federal poverty level and is the lowest in New England.

Not only are the benefits in Maine not overly generous, but people are not flocking to Maine to receive them. Less than 1% of all 2010 recipients of public benefits came to Maine from another state. In fact, from 2008 through July 2010, nearly twice as many aid recipients left Maine each month compared to the number who moved to Maine.

So Why Do Families Turn To Public Assistance Programs For Help?

Families apply for TANF because of the instability of work in the low-wage labor market, as they struggle to sustain employment with low pay, irregular hours, and difficulty balancing work and family.

- Nearly 70% of participants work in the sales and service sectors that are typically female-dominated, providing low wages and few benefits.
- Working TANF parents earned a median wage of only \$8.36/hour.

“As with others who find themselves on TANF, I’d much rather be supporting myself. I’m a hard worker. But I also know that more training will give me a better chance at finding a job that provides me with the wages and hours that I need to support my family.”

- Maine Mother of two

Families turn to TANF as a result of illness and disability. These families often cannot work or sustain employment as a result of their health problems.

- The majority (67%) of TANF families include at least one member with a disability.
- For families receiving TANF for 60 months or more, nearly 90% of participants reported having a work-limiting disability themselves or a child or other family member receiving Supplemental Security Income (SSI).

“My daughter’s a stroke survivor and my son’s immune compromised. I just counted on my calendar and between all the members of my household we had 18 medical appointments in May, which is probably a pretty typical month. So it’s pretty tricky to find work that meets my financial needs.”

- Maine mother of four

Sudden economic disruption resulting from divorce, separation and the need to flee an abusive situation are common reasons that families seek help from TANF.

- Nearly 25% of survey families applied for TANF because of divorce or separation.
- 23% of survey families applied for TANF because they were leaving an abusive relationship.

“Because of domestic violence I was running on auto pilot while I helped my kids get healthy again. My youngest son was seven and his dad offered to load the shotgun for him to kill me. So it was a long way back for them and then once I got them back to a place where they were okay I kind of flat lined. I ended up losing my job and TANF has been very helpful and very supportive.”

- Maine mother of two

CHANGE MUST BE GUIDED

BY FACTS,

NOT ANECDOTES OR FICTION



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