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It’s going on six years now that Maine Equal Justice has been advocating for Medicaid expansion in Maine.

We have made real progress together and the end is now in sight. From 2013 to 2015, the Legislature passed the policy five times. The Governor blocked the legislation each time with a veto. The voters responded by enacting expansion at the ballot box last November with nearly 60% of the vote.

Now the Governor refuses to implement the law. He’s using funding as an excuse for his inaction. But his administration is blatantly violating the new law, and we won’t let that happen. The funding is available and there is no excuse for delay. That’s why we have taken the administration to court to challenge the Governor’s inaction. At the same time, we continue to encourage the legislature to take away the Governor’s empty excuse by appropriating the funds he claims to need.

The law is on our side and we will ultimately prevail so that Mainers will gain access to affordable health care under the new law.

We remain steadfast thanks to Kathy, Donna, Jim, and 70,000 others like them, who have changed and inspired us throughout this campaign. Kathy, who does hair for a living in Waterville left an impression on us when she had the courage to speak her truth with emotion and conviction about needing oxygen she could not afford to breathe easier. Donna from Lewiston, who shared her story with PBS NewsHour (and the world) inspired us when she said matter-of-factly that she needs health care to continue to care for her three adult children with autism who rely on her to stay well. We are motivated every day by Jim who is living with diabetes and heart complications. Jim, who worked at the Great Northern Paper Company until its closure in 2014, will finally be able to get health care come July. He’ll no longer have to choose between diabetes or cardiac care each month.

It is Maine people who keep us focused and forging ahead to expand Medicaid in our state. Regardless of any obstacles or political gameplaying, we will keep going until people like Kathy, Donna, and Jim have the health care they need.

If you may be eligible under the new law, apply for Medicaid on July 2nd and become a plaintiff in our lawsuit – and join the fight for health care. Even if you are initially denied coverage, applying on July 2nd will protect your right to health care from that date forward once we succeed in court. We’ll get this done together; we won’t stop until we do! Please contact us at 1-866-626-7059 with any questions about eligibility or enrollment.
SNAP IS A LIFELINE IN MAINE

“SNAP is a lifeline.” That is how US Navy veteran Tim Keefe describes food assistance.

Tim was one of more than 40 Maine veterans who signed a letter to Congressman Bruce Poliquin detailing the ways many Mainers who have served in the military would be harmed if the House passed its version of H.R. 2, the 2018 Farm Bill. In a troubling shift from previous Farm Bills, U.S. House Republican leaders advanced a partisan bill with deep cuts to the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP).

SNAP is our most effective tool in the nation’s fight against hunger. It assists one in seven Mainers—over 175,000 of our neighbors. It also injects more than $250 million dollars into our state economy.

At a time when one in five Maine children lives with food insecurity and our state ranks third from the bottom for very low food security, the consequences for our state are severe and far-reaching (learn more at http://bit.ly/SNAPcutshurtME).

The House failed to pass H.R. 2 on the first try, but another vote is expected in late June. Rep. Chellie Pingree opposes the bill while Rep. Poliquin has championed it. In the meantime, the Senate is working on a bipartisan version of the Farm Bill. We hope that the Senate bill will protect SNAP and the good it is doing to fight food insecurity in Maine.

Maine Equal Justice will continue to advocate for a robust SNAP program because without it, thousands of Mainers will be unable to put food on their tables. Those who rely on SNAP the most, like parents, older Mainers, people with disabilities, children, veterans, working people, and people in rural areas will be hungrier without food assistance.

Stay up to date on the Farm Bill with us on social media to find out how you can help us protect SNAP.

TEAM UPDATES

Over the last year, the Maine Equal Justice Partners (MEJP) team has gained new capacity and strength. Please join us in welcoming the newest members of our team!

Alison Weiss holds a new role at MEJP as the Communications and Campaign Coordinator. In this role, Alison coordinates MEJP’s communications and campaigns that aim to protect and improve public assistance programs at both the state and federal level. Back in 2013, Alison worked with MEJP to assist with the Cover Maine Now! coalition’s efforts to expand Medicaid. Since then, she gained additional communications and campaign experience, first on Emily Cain’s 2014 congressional campaign and more recently at Spruce Run Womancare Alliance (now Partners for Peace). Alison brings diligence, competence, and creativity to this new role at MEJP and we are lucky to have her on our team.

Kathy Kilrain del Rio is MEJP’s new Policy Analyst. Before joining MEJP, Kathy worked at the Maine Women’s Lobby and Maine Women’s Policy Center as Director of Program and Development. There she focused on freedom from violence, freedom from discrimination, access to health care, and a range of economic security issues. Before that, Kathy worked at Literacy Volunteers.

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At Maine Equal Justice, we focus on solutions. Poverty is not inevitable, not in the wealthiest country in the world. Right now, too many Maine families are barely getting by, with almost one out of every five kids in Maine growing up poor. At the same time, Maine’s businesses and economy are at risk because of a workforce shortage. Solving child poverty and creating economic opportunity go hand in hand and success in both will benefit us all.

In 2017, MEJP worked to pass significant reforms at the Legislature through a bill we named LIFT (Leveraging Investments in Families Today). LIFT created the Working Cars for Working Families program that will get cars to parents, so they can get and keep a job; it increased Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) income that assists families with basic needs (the first such increase in over 15 years); and it increased housing and heating aid for thousands of Maine families. Speaker Sara Gideon championed the cause and as a result, over 2,880 kids will be lifted out of deep poverty.

The funding for this fourth hardship was limited for the first two-year budget period, but not after the first two years. Nevertheless, DHHS stopped helping people once they got work authorization, claiming that the funding had run out. Maine Equal Justice challenged that in court.

The Legislature enacted LIFT 2.0 in April and it is now the law in Maine! The new law uses available federal funds to create the Higher Opportunity for Pathways to Employment (HOPE) program. HOPE will open slots for 500 eligible parents to increase their access to education and training opportunities. Specifically, the new law will:

✔ Leverage existing federal Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) funds to help low-wage Maine parents successfully achieve associate degrees or industry-recognized post-secondary credentials leading to jobs in any field that has at least an average job outlook as determined by the Department of Labor.

✔ Help low-wage parents achieve bachelor’s degrees leading to jobs in health care, technology or engineering.

Court Decision Helps Immigrants Access Food Assistance and Other Basic Needs

A recent Maine Supreme Court decision means that people seeking asylum in Maine who get their work authorization who are not yet employed can get Food Assistance (SNAP) and Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF).

Due to budget cuts back in 2011, asylum seekers and other groups of lawfully present immigrants could only get SNAP or TANF if they fit into a hardship category: (1) elderly or disabled; (2) survivor of domestic violence; or (3) waiting for work authorization. In 2013, MEJP successfully advocated in the Legislature to add a fourth hardship category for people who have work authorization who are not yet working. Lawmakers recognized it is nearly impossible to secure employment the day you get work authorization and getting a job can take time.

The funding for this fourth hardship was limited for the first two-year budget period, but not after the first two years. Nevertheless, DHHS stopped helping people once they got work authorization, claiming that the funding had run out. Maine Equal Justice challenged that in court.

In Euphrem Manirakiza, et. al. v. Department of Health and Human Services the Court ruled that the temporary funding limit no longer applied, after the first two-year period and the fourth hardship (having your work authorization but being unemployed) is still the law. If you know someone seeking asylum who may be impacted, please help us spread the word!

Big thanks to attorneys Amy Olfene, Melissa Hewey, and David Kallin of the law firm Drummond Woodsum who provided the legal assistance (pro bono) in this successful litigation!
JACK COMART AND HEALTH CARE LEADERSHIP TEAM RECEIVE AWARDS

Maine Equal Justice’s Litigation Director, Jack Comart, received the Distinguished Health Care Hero award from Consumers for Affordable Health Care (CAHC) at the group’s 30th Anniversary Celebration in early June.

The award recognizes Jack’s extraordinary contributions and advocacy over the past three decades to promote and enact policy initiatives aimed at preserving, improving, and expanding access to affordable health care. Jack has worked at MEJP since 2004 and is Maine’s leading expert on Medicaid (MaineCare) law and policy.

Also honored at CAHC’s event was the Health Care Leadership Team, receiving the Organizational Health Care Hero award. This group of 12 advocates helped pass Medicaid Expansion last fall by speaking out, speaking up, and sharing their stories about the value of Medicaid coverage. The Leadership Team also received an award at Maine People’s Alliance Rising Tide Dinner honoring the team as Volunteer(s) of the Year. This award recognizes bold, brave, persistent, and strategic leadership rooted in values that make our state a better place to live. The Health Care Leadership Team represents a powerful model of effective grassroots organizing. Congratulations!

Guarantee all HOPE participants access to wrap-around support services, such as child care and transportation, to help them succeed in their education.

Increase educational institutions’ capacity to provide navigators to work one-on-one with program participants to help them overcome obstacles.

MEJP organized turnout for the public hearing on LIFT 2.0, with dozens of stakeholders testifying in support, but it was the testimony from parents that members of the Health and Human Services Committee found most persuasive. As one mother testified at the public hearing, “There are many like me who want to be part of that workforce of the future. Single parents, including parents of special needs kids, want to provide for their families just like everyone else. And we can with the kind of help this bill provides.”

The final version of the bill was a successful bipartisan compromise that garnered strong support from both Democrats and Republicans in both chambers of the Legislature. We all have a stake in addressing child poverty and creating economic opportunity and LIFT 2.0 is yet another step toward those goals for Maine.

We will continue to build on these successes in the years ahead with the Invest in Tomorrow initiative. MEJP is working with a diverse group of stakeholders from around the state to identify strategies to reduce child poverty and leverage economic opportunities for Maine families.

The Invest in Tomorrow stakeholder group will publish policy recommendations and a “scorecard” to measure Maine’s success in meeting shared goals in 2019 and beyond. You can learn more about the initiative and join the effort here: http://mejp.org/content/invest-tomorrow-solving-child-poverty-everyones-business
At Maine Equal Justice we are proud of what we’ve been able to accomplish by bringing people together to advocate for justice in recent years despite very challenging times.

The Equal Justice Partner’s Circle, a project of Maine Equal Justice, is a group of people who have demonstrated the power a community with conviction and commitment can build.

Beginning in 2015, the Partner’s Circle brought 20 community leaders and advocates who were directly impacted by injustice together with MEJPs policy and organizing team. We committed to stop the shaming and blaming of poor people, people of color, and immigrants, and to propose workable solutions to economic injustice in Maine.

Since 2016, MEJP and the Partner’s Circle have worked together to defeat over $65 million in cuts to basic needs programs, stop bills that hurt immigrants at the Maine legislature, pass LIFT legislation to increase support for low income families, and help to pass Medicaid Expansion at the ballot. We are keeping up the fight to implement health care for 70,000 and just won in court to this end.

While we are proud of these victories, this is just the beginning. We are living in very troubling times. At the national and state level, resources are being diverted from our own struggling communities to the wealthy, and programs we rely on slashed in the name of austerity. We see families separated in the cruelest ways and child poverty on the rise in the wealthiest country in the world. We see Mainers under attack—in convenience stores, on the street and in our institutions—for being poor or black and brown or Muslim or gender non-conforming. In 2018, people are still barred from opportunity because of the color of their skin, their gender, or their place of birth. Many who have the potential to lead us are under so much pressure to just survive.

In June, 30 leaders joined the 2018 Equal Justice Partner’s Circle. Some are taking their first steps as advocates; others have been active a long time in the fight for justice and equality. We are excited to see what this new cohort will do and build together. We are also inspired by the 2016 leaders who returned to train this new group. Maine Equal Justice believes everyone has leadership skills that need only to be developed and supported. There is a role in social change work for everyone.

The Partners Circle’s shared leadership model means we believe everyone has something to lead on and everyone has something to learn. We must take direction and leadership from the true experts on poverty: the people who live it, who courageously build resilient communities despite it, and who have so much to teach about what can be done to address it. Working with low-income communities means realizing remarkable home-grown leadership and the chance to find greater justice side by side.

“This is not the way things are supposed to be. And they do not have to remain this way.”

– Angela Davis

Cheryl of Harpswell shares her personal story of generational poverty and her experiences advocating for change with the Equal Justice Partner Circle.
Moxie Fund Supports New Case Coach for Low-Income Legal Help

This year, Maine Equal Justice is creating a new Case Coach position. The Moxie Case Coach will work to provide legal assistance and support to people who face difficulties accessing food, healthcare, housing and other basic needs.

This new position at Maine Equal Justice is made possible by the NEW Moxie Fund.

The Moxie Fund was created in Fall 2017 in honor of Chris Hastedt, MEJP’s Co-founder and Public Policy Director, to provide quality, effective direct assistance to people struggling to make ends meet AND to give someone who knows the challenges of poverty firsthand the opportunity to gain professional work experience and training in the field of legal advocacy.

The Maine Health Access Foundation (MeHAF) helped inspire the creation of the Moxie Fund when they named Chris as the first Dr. Wendy J. Wolf Health Leadership Award recipient in 2017. The award honored Chris’ exceptional leadership and achievements in promoting access to quality health care and improving the health of Maine people, particularly the uninsured and underserved. The award included a $10,000 grant to Maine Equal Justice that provided the seed money needed to create the Moxie Fund.

We believe that opening this opportunity up will both strengthen the organization and provide valuable experience to whomever holds the position. We aim to support someone along their path who, like Chris, has Moxie and the dedication to rise up and bring others along in the process.

Please consider making a donation in honor of Chris to support the Moxie Fund and MEJP’s Case Coach position. Give online at MEJP.org or send a check, noting your gift is for Moxie.

People who have lived poverty know better than anyone else what the barriers are and what the solutions should look like. In that spirit, Maine Equal Justice has established the Moxie Fund and the Case Coach position.

TEAM UPDATES continued...

of Maine where she helped create the original Easy-to-Read Voter Guide with the League of Women Voters of Maine. As Policy Analyst at MEJP, Kathy is now flexing her policy muscles and she’s a real natural! Kathy brings integrity and thoughtfulness to her work every day. We are grateful to have her on board.

Pat Ende is back! Pat was MEJP’s first Litigation Director before leaving to work for the Baldacci Administration in 2004. After working as Chief Legal Counsel in the Office of the Governor, Pat served as a district court judge for seven years. Pat has rejoined MEJP as our Policy and Legal Liaison. In this temporary position Pat is helping us initiate and coordinate MEJP’s impact litigation and policy activities. Having started his legal career as a legal aid attorney at Pine Tree Legal Assistance in 1985, Pat is back in his element advancing the rights of people with low income in Maine.

In addition to these changes, Maine Equal Justice is now hiring a Community Organizer and a Moxie Case Coach to provide direct legal assistance to Mainers struggling to meet their basic needs.

We’re sad to say farewell to Victoria Rodriguez, MEJP’s talented story collection coordinator, who has accepted an advocacy fellowship with Global Health Corps in Washington, D.C. We wish her well with this new opportunity!
STAFF LISTING
Kate Brennan, Organizer/Outreach Coordinator
Jack Comart, Esq., Litigation Director
Pat Ende, Esq., Policy and Legal Liaison
Christine Hastedt, Public Policy Director
Kathy Kilrain del Rio, Policy Analyst
Hildie Lipson, Director of Development and Operations
Robyn Merrill, Esq., Executive Director
Victoria Rodriguez, Story Collection Coordinator
Jennifer Sanborn, Office Manager
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