Last fall we asked what issues to focus on in the 2017 legislative session. We heard you loud and clear: affordable housing. Transportation. Healthcare. Education and training opportunities for parents. Reducing the “welfare cliff.” We listened...
You advocated on behalf of Maine families and communities at the Legislature, and we stopped harmful cuts. You showed your commitment to economic justice, and we strengthened Maine’s anti-poverty programs. We did this together.

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We knew Maine had stockpiled federal TANF funds. We wanted those funds put to good use to reduce growing deep child poverty in Maine. We set out to use those unspent funds to address your priorities, and we did it. With you, we made a meaningful difference in the lives of kids and families.

We worked closely with those of you who know poverty firsthand (our Equal Justice Partner Circle and others). We joined with those of you who are advocates and providers serving low-income communities. Together we crafted legislation to reduce deep child poverty and create economic opportunity for families living on the edge. Speaker of the House Sara Gideon (D-Freeport) sponsored a major anti-poverty bill – LIFT (Leveraging Investments in Families Today). Some of its proposals passed in the budget. Those proposals will indeed LIFT at least 2,500 Maine children out of deep poverty (defined as income of less than $10,000 a year for family of 3).

KEY SECTIONS OF THE LIFT BILL HAVE NOW BECOME LAW:

✔ The first TANF increase in 16 years! TANF families will see a 20% TANF increase starting October 1, 2017. The 4,500 families that rely on this essential support will struggle less to make ends meet. A family of 3 will see their benefit increase by nearly $100 dollars, from $485 a month, to $582.

✔ TANF benefits will be increased annually beginning October 1, 2018 to reflect increases in the cost of living!

✔ More help for TANF families with high housing costs! The TANF “housing special need” (HSN) will both increase AND become available to more families. The 1,000 families now getting this will get an additional $100 each month. To be eligible, these families have to spend 75% of their income on housing. Now, families with housing costs that equal or exceed 50% of their income will be eligible, too. An estimated 480 families will now get the extra help they need for the first time.

✔ The Working Cars for Working Families Program will help low income families with children get to work! The budget allocated $1.5 Million dollars a year for four years ($6 M total) to create a pilot program to purchase reliable used cars for working families with children eligible for TANF, Parents as Scholars and Alternative Aid. We estimate approximately 150 cars a year will go to working families as part of this program.

✔ More heating assistance for low income families with children! The original LIFT bill provided funds for heat pumps to lower heating costs for low income families with children. Instead of this, the final budget includes an additional $3 million dollars a year to keep kids warm through the Low Income Home Energy Assistance Program (LIHEAP).

and that’s not all...
LD 336 ends the “deprivation standard” and ensures that two-parent families have equal access to TANF benefits. Representative Dale Denno (D-Cumberland) championed a bill to reduce deep child poverty in Maine. Two-parent families will now qualify for TANF under the same rules that apply to single parent families. Previously, a two parent family had to prove their children were “deprived” of the support of one parent. They could only qualify if one parent was incapacitated or unemployed. Now, DHHS will only look at the income of these families to determine TANF eligibility. We estimate that over 500 two-parent families will now qualify for TANF because of this change.

LD 481 reduces the “welfare cliff” by rewarding TANF families that get and keep a job. One of the biggest complaints from TANF families is that they feel punished by having their benefits reduced when they get a job. Thanks to Representative Trey Stewart (R-Presque Isle) for taking an important step to reduce this work penalty. Representative Stewart's bill will give TANF families a $400 dollar bonus at the end of four months if they stay employed. This will be a helpful boost to family budgets. (This is a pilot program that will be evaluated at the end of 2018.)

LD 358 will provide health insurance to an additional 1,000 low income children. This bill, presented by Representative Matt Pouliot (R-Augusta), was included in the budget. It eliminates the discriminatory provision that has barred the children of Maine state employees with low income from qualifying for MaineCare (SCHIP) coverage.

These changes will be effective as of October 1, 2017. Please be on the lookout for materials from us with more detail. We'll be letting you know how programs will work and what this will mean for you.

Your efforts helped achieve these significant gains for low income families! But that's just the beginning. You also helped fend off $65 million in cuts to anti-poverty programs that the Governor proposed in his biennial budget. And that's not it, either. Your efforts helped defeat dozens of other stand-alone bills that would have made it even harder for struggling Mainers.

OTHER SUCCESSFUL LEGISLATION WILL HELP LOW-INCOME FAMILIES WITH CHILDREN

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YOUR HARD WORK PREVENTED ALL OF THE FOLLOWING CUTS:

✖ Reduction in MaineCare parent eligibility from 100% to 40% of the federal poverty level. This would have eliminated MaineCare coverage for more than 20,000 parents. These parents remain eligible for MaineCare.

✖ Elimination of MaineCare coverage for 19 and 20 year olds. This would have eliminated MaineCare coverage for 5,500 young adults. These young adults remain eligible for MaineCare.

✖ Total elimination of the General Assistance (GA) program. Maine people will continue to have access to this safety net of last resort.

✖ Denying immigrants access to anti-poverty programs (including GA, SNAP, TANF and SSI). Immigrants who are eligible for these programs are able to continue accessing them.

✖ Reduction in TANF lifetime time limit from 60 to 36 months. 1,500 children would have lost benefits that help families meet their basic needs. The current 60-month time limit will not be shortened.

✖ Denial of TANF and SNAP for life for any parent with a felony drug conviction. Parents who have served their time and reentered the community will still get help meeting their families’ basic needs if they meet all other TANF and/or SNAP eligibility requirements.

✖ Limits on the length of time that a parent can participate in the Parents as Scholars (PaS) program and the number of hours that they must participate. There will not be a change in the length of time that a person will have to complete their degree.

✖ Cut to Head Start of approximately $2 Million dollars. Not only was this cut rejected, but the Head Start program will get an additional $1 million dollars to continue a prior amount of one-time funding. This will allow Head Start programs statewide to serve additional children over the next two years!

For complete list see: http://www.mejp.org/content/2017-proposed-budget-cuts-prevented

You made change happen!

Many of you joined our statewide Equal Justice calls. Over 400 of you signed support flyers for LIFT. Over 300 of you called, wrote, and visited your legislators. At least 139 of you joined us to testify at a public hearing. You made signs, and you showed up at the State House—sometimes with very little notice. You are the movement of Mainers calling for more, not less—more access to opportunity, more respect for each other, and more justice for all. Thank you for your hard work and dedication!

None of this would have happened without your help.

Thank you! You shared your stories and raised your voices in support of real reform. You disproved the cruel stereotypes that have characterized the debate over poverty in past years. You helped policy makers understand the reality of poverty in Maine—why it exists and what it will really take to change it.

Our work is not done.

We hope that together we will continue to call for more, not less, opportunity for all Maine people. Together we will continue to bring issues to the ballot box, speak out at the State House, and fight for the people’s voices to be heard. We will continue to work to create the Maine that we all believe is possible—one in which all Mainers have a place to call home, access to health care, food in the fridge, and the opportunity to get a family-sustaining job. We hope you will stay connected to build on our successes together!
We can do this in November! The 2017 ballot will ask you if you want to expand Medicaid.

We know that Mainers want more access to affordable health care, not less. The cost of health care, and especially prescription drugs, is taking a heavier and heavier toll on our families and neighbors.

Federal funds were earmarked for Maine 3 years ago that would provide health insurance to 70,000 Mainers by expanding Medicaid coverage. The Maine Legislature passed legislation five times to put these federal funds to work for Maine. The Governor has vetoed each bill without having a true understanding of the implications.

Expanding access to Medicaid is a common sense move that will improve health, create 3,000 jobs throughout the State, and help preserve Maine’s community hospitals and health centers that so many of us depend on.

During these uncertain times, it is more important than ever that we stand together. We must stand united for more affordable health care, not less!

Maine voters support Medicaid Expansion and we need your help to remind them what’s at stake at the ballot this November. We are working to collect stories from community members that are currently enrolled in Medicaid, were denied Medicaid coverage, or are currently uninsured. What’s your story? Did you lose MaineCare? Are you living without health care? Do you or a family member rely on Medicaid to stay healthy and participate fully in your community? Are you a provider who sees the impact Medicaid – or the lack of good health care – has on people you work with?

Please contact Maine Equal Justice’s new Story Collection Coordinator Victoria at vrodriguez@mejp.org.

Interested in volunteering on the campaign in other ways? Please contact Maine Equal Justice organizer Kate at kbrennan@mejp.org.

Join Us! Check out mainersforhealthcare.org to learn how you can get involved!

“Maine Equal Justice is so effective because they work closely with people directly impacted by the policies they advance.

They listen and they see what is really happening for people. Then they come together and help legislators understand that reality. Working together we are able to make a real difference in peoples’ lives.

But make no mistake; every positive solution that we achieve is really possible because of the courageous and authentic voices of those who know poverty, and its solutions, better than anyone else – those who have lived it.

I want to thank you for showing up, for being so willing to share your own stories and for helping to make positive change happen. This is just the beginning of what we can accomplish when we work together...”

– Speaker of the House, Sara Gideon
Kristina's biggest worry is feeding her kids and making ends meet. She works over 30 hours a week, and her partner works 40 hours at a job he's had for 13 years. Even so, she says it feels like they “work just to buy food and pay rent.”

Michele explained that it’s hard “just managing everything and juggling it all,” especially when she had to find a new home for her family.

In Michele’s vision for the future in Maine, she imagines “a village mentality where people work together and aren’t scared to meet each other. There will be more help and less judgment.” While at the legislature to show support for LIFT and a just and moral budget, the Parent Ambassadors felt that village start to come together. Kaitlyn explained some of the connections they’ve made with other advocates in the Waterville area and said, “It’s been more than just advocating. It’s networking and finding connections with people and between issues. You start asking what to do next and making connections to join efforts.”

Kristina’s advice for others who might be new to advocacy is “just jump in and do it. Take the opportunity to learn and to get involved.” Michele added, “It’s awesome. It’s great to know your voice can be heard and makes a difference.”
We also recognize and thank the dedicated work of key legislative champions. There are many to thank, but Speaker Sara Gideon and Appropriations Chair Drew Gattine made it a priority this session to hold the line on harmful health and human services cuts and pushed for policy change to reduce deep child poverty. For that—and to them, we are grateful.

“This past legislative session, I answered Maine Equal Justice's calls to come to Augusta. Several times I went up to talk to lawmakers about my experience as an immigrant in Maine. I shared my story of how I came here to seek asylum and how I have since made Maine my home. I told them how thankful I am for the help I received from General Assistance when I first arrived before I was allowed to work. That assistance was crucial. It helped me survive. It helped me make connections that led to my first job. Ultimately, it helped me successfully integrate both socially and economically. While I no longer need assistance, I’m glad I was able to speak on behalf of others who do. I know firsthand what a difference it makes in peoples’ lives.”

– Leopold Ndayisabye
Jeanne Hanson, Charley Conley and Helen Roy supporting a fair and moral budget

Chris, Michele, Kaitlyn, and Kristina (with her youngest) at Educare in Waterville