



ESSENTIAL JUSTICE

SUMMER 2023

Thanks to each and every one of you, we've navigated the triumphs and challenges of another legislative session.

We've taken real steps towards a brighter, more equitable future. Today I want to share with you the successes, disappointments, and the opportunities that lie ahead.

The great news: our collective work means new laws on the books in Maine to increase income and enhance renter protections. The fully refundable state Child Tax Credit is now available to Maine families who were previously unable to benefit from it, providing much-needed income support. The highly successful Competitive Skills Scholarship Program (CSSP) has been expanded, granting greater access to education and training for those with low income. And LD 945 will give families with TANF flexibility to save more to plan for emergencies and their futures.

The hard news: some crucial priorities didn't reach the finish line this year. Although the All Means All legislation (LD 199) to close the health coverage gap for immigrant adults was voted down in the Senate, the bill won more allies in the legislature and statewide than ever and we built momentum for the future. The HOME Act (LD1710) and our TANF/ASPIRE reform bill (LD 1877) will be carried over to the second session.

We are so impressed by the work of impacted community leaders and the voices of impacted community members on the MEJ leadership teams this year. Together, Maine people who have experienced living with low income and MEJ staff identified problems, researched solutions, and organized the voices of those affected, which was instrumental in driving meaningful change. My heartfelt thanks to these incredible Mainers for their dedication and contributions.

In challenging times, I'm inspired by your support and commitment to economic justice. We're all deeply grateful to all of you who support equal justice and hope to count on your continued dedication in the months and years ahead as we persist in our fight for equitable healthcare, affordable housing solutions, and increased income for families.



In solidarity,

Robyn Merrill, Executive Director

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LEGISLATIVE UPDATES

This has been a busy legislative session, with more bills introduced than ever before. Here are highlights of some of the bills we worked on:

HOUSING

New renter rights bills now law!

- **LD 691** bans most rental application fees, which will help all Mainers who are searching for housing in a tight market, but especially people with low income who can't afford multiple, non-refundable application fees.
- **LD 701** will ensure that most tenants in Maine have at least 75 days notice when their rent is going up by 10% or more. This is so important for families with low income, for whom a big increase in rent can be the same as eviction.

Rent relief and LD 1710 are carried over.

Rent relief is a policy that would help Mainers with low incomes who face the most housing instability--for them, even "affordable housing" isn't affordable without help. Unfortunately, rent relief was not passed or funded this session. LD 1710 (the HOME Act) was carried over by the Housing Committee and will be worked on in the second session of the 131st legislature. We won't give up - we know the power of people joining together to push for a fair housing system will prevail.

INCOME SOLUTIONS



Maine expanded the Child Tax Credit!

LD 1544, which passed as part of the budget, strengthens Maine's CTC by expanding it to include families with the lowest incomes and allowing it to increase with inflation. Starting in 2024, families earning below \$30,000 (or \$42,000 if married filing jointly) will now receive \$300 per child annually. Before this change, around 50,000 Maine families, including 73,000 dependent children and 84,000 dependent adults were not receiving the full credit because their incomes were too low.

TANF improvements are now law!

The legislature passed and Gov. Mills signed LD 945, a bill which raises the amount of money families with TANF can save and allows one car per licensed driver to be excluded from the asset limit. This is a real victory for Maine people who spoke out about the need to change the asset limits and the MEJ TANF/ASPIRE Leadership Team!

LD 1877 is carried over. Our other TANF/ASPIRE program reform bill will be taken up by the legislature next year.

HEALTH CARE

All Means All LD 199 defeated in Senate. The bill to remove exclusions for immigrants in the MaineCare program passed in the House but failed in the Senate. It was amended to be more targeted for parents in response to concerns about cost and again passed in the House, but it failed again in the Senate.

The All Means All campaign, of which MEJ is a member, said:

“The arc of justice is long, but in Maine it is bending toward health equity. Those without access to life-saving health care can’t afford the luxury of time, so we’ll continue to bring their urgent stories to legislators and we won’t stop until health care for all truly means all.”



Medicare Savings Program (MSP) eligibility expanded! Championed by our friends at the Maine Council on Aging, LD 1522 expands eligibility for the MSP to 250% of the federal poverty level and eliminates the asset

test to qualify. The bill was included in the supplemental budget, LD 258. By helping older Mainers with low incomes pay for health care costs, they will have more money available to meet their basic needs.

RACIAL EQUITY

Tribal Sovereignty bill LD 2007 carried over and LD 2004 vetoed. While it passed with strong bipartisan support, LD 2004, An Act to Restore Access to Federal Laws Beneficial to the Wabanaki Nations, was vetoed by Governor Mills and the veto was sustained in the House. Maine Equal Justice will continue to follow the lead of the Wabanaki Alliance in support of tribal sovereignty next year.



TRAINING AND EDUCATION

Competitive Skills Scholarship Program (CSSP) expansion is law! More workers across Maine will have access to funding for transformative education and training programs and related expenses like transportation and childcare thanks to an expanded CSSP. LD 1394 supports eligible Maine residents to pursue two- and

four-year degree programs or employer-recognized credentials leading to high-wage, in-demand jobs in Maine, and extends CSSP funding to programs like apprenticeship and pre-apprenticeship programs, which have a proven track record for doubling wages for participants.

(THANK YOU FOR) ORGANIZING WITH US



More than
1000
Mainers took action with
Maine Equal Justice this
legislative session

A huge thank you to everyone who joined us to push for health and housing justice, for a boost to Maine's Child Tax Credit and improvements to the TANF (Temporary Assistance for Need Families) program. These policy priorities were generated and developed by our leadership teams and impacted community members in the months leading up to the legislative session. We couldn't have done it without you, especially our Housing, ASPIRE and All Means All Leadership Teams!

WE TOOK ACTION TOGETHER AND IT MADE A DIFFERENCE

More than 1,000 Mainers took action with Maine Equal Justice this legislative session by making phone calls, signing petitions, sending messages to legislators, showing up at the State House to lobby in person, writing a letter to the editor or op-ed or joining a leadership team or stakeholder group to organize together! All this energy brought so much people power in the push for bills that would improve the lives of low income Mainers.

We'll be attending community events around the state and reaching out to partners in parts of Maine we don't always get to connect with face to face. Stay tuned for Maine Equal Justice in your neck of the woods!

WHAT IS A LEADERSHIP TEAM?

The leadership teams at Maine Equal Justice are a group of roughly ten community leaders and advocates who are impacted by one or more of the issues we work on at MEJ. These teams work together to identify the problem, research solutions, strategize with the policy team and organize other impacted people in Maine to win meaningful changes in our laws. Our leadership teams meet once a month or more frequently when decisions need to be made quickly during the legislative process. This year we were lucky to work with a Housing Leadership Team, an ASPIRE leadership team and the leadership team of the All Means All Coalition in their fight for health care justice! We also worked closely with a team of trusted community members who helped us organize around access and an expansion of the Child Tax Credit. Often, leadership team members start as members of the [Equal Justice Partners' Circle](#) and as they get more involved in the work and take on various leadership roles, they apply to be part of the leadership team.



LEGAL SERVICES UPDATE

So far in 2023, our legal services team has worked on 300 cases to help families across Maine

to access income support (TANF), food assistance (SNAP), health care (MaineCare), and housing and other needs (General Assistance), and maintain safe and stable housing by providing legal defense in evictions. In June, MEJ partnered with Pine Tree Legal Assistance to represent 61 families who were being evicted from

a hotel in South Portland. Our legal team negotiated an extension for the tenants' move out date, which gave state and local government time to strike a deal extending transitional housing in the hotel for another year so that these families can find long-term housing. As a result, none of the families in the hotel will be evicted! MEJ legal advocates continue to fill gaps in Maine's social safety net while MEJ pushes for economic justice and big picture change at the State House.

PEER WORKFORCE NAVIGATOR PROGRAM

The Peer Workforce Navigator (PWN) program is a three-year effort among community-based organizations (including Food AND Medicine, Gateway Community Services Maine, Maine AFL-CIO, Maine Equal Justice and Prosperity Maine) in partnership with the Maine Department of Labor (MDOL).

Our Friday clinics at ProsperityMaine have become a known resource for multilingual assistance filing for unemployment, public benefits, and jobs. We're grateful for all our community partners and especially the cultural broker volunteers who bring awesome energy and expand navigator capacity. This clinic has proven such a successful model that



researchers from the US DOL recently toured the clinic, as well as FAM and MEJ in Bangor and Augusta.

We are expanding our footprint in Lewiston/Auburn as navigators Bright, Hatim, and Leslie connect with

NEW STAFF

Emily Manter, Director of Donor Engagement



Emily studied politics at Bates and worked in Rep. Jared Golden's district office. She spends her free time making pottery.

Hussein Maow, Paralegal



Hussein is a recent USM grad and has worked with many community organizations. He spends his free time with family and friends and enjoys traveling.

Heather Cimellaro, Office Manager



Heather comes to us after ten years in education/teaching. They enjoy reality TV and have three kids under 6.

New Mainers at our Lewiston clinics and the unhoused community at the Pleasant Street Drop-in Center. We were also able to catch some sun at the Dept. of Labor's outdoor job fair in Kennedy Park.

In May, the PWN program welcomed Hatim Ibrahim as the new navigator with Gateway Community Services. In July, Wabanaki Public and Wellness joined the team as an official partner, and is working to recruit and onboard two navigators in the coming weeks.

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We hope you'll join us in this work by making a contribution to Maine Equal Justice this month. We've done a lot to advance economic justice and equity in Maine this year, but there is so much more to do. Your partnership will help us sustain this critical work in the Legislature, in the courts and in community with Mainers to build our collective voice!

You can make a contribution using the envelope provided or by visiting MaineEqualJustice.org/donate-online.

The best way to help us sustain our work is by becoming a monthly or quarterly contributor! Recurring donations of \$5, \$10, or \$25 per month make each dollar you give go further.



Maine Equal Justice

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NEWSLETTER

