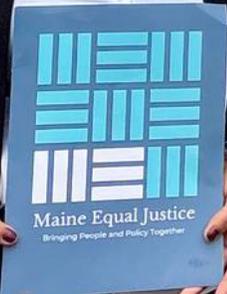




Maine Equal Justice
People Policy Solutions

ESSENTIAL JUSTICE

2025



IN THIS ISSUE

ADVOCACY IN DC

LEGISLATIVE SESSION
IN REVIEW

NEW STAFF

TEAM UPDATES

STAFF

Catherine Buxton, *Peer Workforce Navigator Project Policy and Community Engagement Manager*

Alex Carter, *Policy Advocate*

Heather Cimellaro, *Operations and Finance Manager*

Katie Collins, *Paralegal*

Ann Danforth, *Senior Policy Advocate*

Allina Diaz, *Community Organizing Director and Leadership Coach*

Kate Fahey, *Peer Workforce Navigator Project Director*

Oriana Farnham, Esq., *Senior Attorney*

Sam Heck, *Development and Finance Director*

Deb Ibonwa, Esq., *Senior Attorney/JEDI (Justice Equity Diversity & Inclusion) Director*

Kathy Kilrain del Rio, *Advocacy and Programs Director*

Dina Malual, *Policy Advocate*

Emily Manter, *Director of Donor Engagement*

Robyn Merrill, Esq., *Executive Director*

Sylvie Motoum, *Peer Workforce Navigator Project Clinic Navigator*

Houssein Mouhoumed, *Paralegal*

Nellie Nowak, *Office Manager*

Heather Sheppard, *Build HOPE Director*

Jackie Stearns, *Operations Director*

Andrea Steward, *Policy Advocate*

Ari van den Akker, *Communications and Digital Outreach Coordinator*

Amy Villanueva, *Public Benefits Attorney*

Alison Weiss, *Communications Director*

Suzy Young, *Peer Workforce Navigator Project Unemployment Insurance Navigator*

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www.mainequaljustice.org

(207) 626-7058

In July, the first session of the 132nd Legislature came to a close.

We cheered for boosting Maine's Child Tax Credit and hospital free care, though we were disappointed by a lack of funds for the Eviction Prevention Program (this work continues next year!). We pushed for tax policies that would require wealthy Mainers pay their fair share so we can fund essential programs.

Alongside many allies, we stopped harmful cuts to General Assistance. GA helps people when they need food, medicine, and shelter and have nowhere else to turn. With strong support from Democrats on the Appropriations Committee and in the legislature, this essential resource was saved.

2025 has been especially challenging because of sweeping federal cuts to SNAP (food assistance), Medicaid (MaineCare), and other critical resources that people with low-incomes depend on, pushed through by Congressional Republicans and President Trump. The federal budget raises urgent questions for our work, our clients, our communities, and for the broader fight for economic security for all.

Two wonderful, longstanding staff members also departed MEJ, though their influence and their work for justice will always be with us.

Frank D'Alessandro spent his 40-year career, the last six years of it as MEJ's Legal Director, launching big impact lawsuits from tiny legal aid offices, defending homeowners, or convincing courts and legislators to see things differently. His leadership and mentorship have inspired a generation of advocates for economic justice.

Kate Brennan has been a fundamental part of MEJ for 11 years as our Organizing and Outreach Director. Kate envisioned a network of people of all backgrounds, united by shared values and the belief that all people should have the resources and opportunity to reach their full potential. She will continue to fight for that vision at the MSEA-SEIU!

At Maine Equal Justice, we work alongside Mainers and we don't give up! As it says in the poem, "each day [we] mean one more," whether we're at the court house, the state house, or working with Mainers from Fort Kent or Kittery.

Together, we'll do all we can to limit the harm from the federal level and continue to make positive policy changes here in Maine.



"It goes on one at a time, it starts when you care to act, it starts when you do it again and they said no, it starts when you say We and know who you mean, and each day you mean one more."

-The Low Road, Marge Piercy



In solidarity,

Kathy Kilrain del Rio, *Advocacy & Programs Director*

CRUEL AND CHAOTIC BUDGET IS THE BEGINNING OF A NEW CHAPTER IN FEDERAL WORK

In July, U.S. House and Senate Republicans, working with President Trump, narrowly passed a budget that takes billions of dollars in health care and food assistance away from Americans with low income—all to pay for tax breaks for corporations and the wealthy.

Working alongside Maine people who would be hurt most by this budget, we shared strong opposition to the bill with Maine's Congressional delegation. Many of our Equal Justice Partners' Circle members shared their stories with local and national press, and our policy experts and advocates met regularly with Maine's Congressional offices, including in person in Washington, D.C.

Belinda, a member of MEJ's Housing Leadership Team who traveled to D.C., remarked:

"When our communities are pushed to the margins—when we're overlooked or unheard—that's often when our collective strength rises to the surface...I had a chance to meet with our Maine Representatives and Senators...I emphasized how vital it is to have leaders who are willing to stand in the gap—to advocate, to support, and to bring back a sense of hope and joy to our neighborhoods."

Selma, another member of the Housing Leadership Team who went to D.C., reflected later:

"To MEJ, I just want to express my gratitude to give us the opportunity to represent our State and meet with our Representatives and Senators putting on the table our biggest



needs...I couldn't imagine that after my trip I would go straight to the hospital with my son who has sickle anemia and [that I would] rely on MaineCare like never before because I knew that my son would get the treatment without worrying about how I will pay the bills."

All four members of Maine's delegation voted against the final bill. Still, the budget passed Congress with a single deciding vote—and in stark contrast to the will of Maine people.

Unfortunately, the tax provisions in the bill also do little to help working and lower-income Mainers. According to the Maine Center for Economic Policy, the top 1% of Maine households will see an average tax cut of \$34,000 for 2026, compared with \$1,500 for middle-income families and just \$30 for low-income households.

Those who will benefit least from the tax changes are also most harmed by cuts to Medicaid and SNAP. Changes to the Child Tax Credit included in the budget are also not targeted to help benefit people with lower incomes.

As different parts of the bill come into effect, Maine Equal Justice will be working to share information and prevent harm wherever we can.

We will continue to help Mainers sign up for and keep the health care, food, and other essentials they qualify for and need. We will continue to let you know when your voice will have the most impact. And we will continue to work on state policies that make progress toward economic security for all Mainers.

NEXT STEP FUND

The Next Step Fund gets money directly to people who are moving ahead in their own lives and leading efforts to change laws, policies, and systems for the better.

If you're able, we hope you'll commit to this work with us by making a donation — and consider designating it for the Next Step Fund. You'll be helping to remove barriers to advocacy and be fueling the leadership of those closest to the issues.

LEGISLATIVE UPDATES

These are highlights of the bills we worked on, but there were many others. More information is on our website at maineequaljustice.org/blog.



HOUSING

Rent relief will be reconsidered

The Eviction Prevention Program (LD 1522), was not funded to extend rent relief for two more years. Because of this loss in funding, more than 1,000 Maine households who face eviction because of rapidly rising rents may lose their homes and their economic stability. MEJ and housing allies will keep working to pass the EPP bill (sponsored by Rep. Ambureen Rana) again in 2026. In the meantime, the successful pilot has stopped accepting applications for rent relief, and a national housing group will look at the program's results.

Emergency shelters funded

Legislators also provided about \$4.5 million in one-time funding for emergency shelters, a move MEJ strongly supported. Emergency shelters provide vital support to people who have lost their home - they're both a safe place to stay and can help Mainers find a new home.

INCOME SOLUTIONS

Maine's Child Tax Credit doubled

With the cost of groceries and other basic goods rising, it's more important than ever for families to have cash assistance that they can use on what their families need. That's why we're excited that LD 1294 passed. This bill doubles Maine's child tax credit from \$300 to \$600 for kids under six for



families with taxable income below \$150k per year.

This change will boost incomes for over 47,000 families, with more than 67,500 children benefitting, according to the nonpartisan tax policy group ITEP!

Advocated for better ASPIRE delivery

MEJ and our ASPIRE Leadership Team also spoke in favor of improving Maine's Temporary Assistance for Needy Families program, or TANF, which provides cash assistance to families with the lowest incomes. Over many years, we've worked to make TANF/ASPIRE and Parents as Scholars (PaS) work better for families in Maine.

We supported LD 943 which would have moved the privatized delivery of ASPIRE back to the Department of Health and Human Services.

While the bill did not pass, legislators asked hard questions of the private contractor, Fedcap, about why they are not providing participants with the support and services they need and are eligible for. This advocacy and accountability work will continue!

GENERAL ASSISTANCE (GA)

GA funding increased

The legislature increased yearly GA funding by \$2 million, added \$8 million in one-time funding, and rejected harmful time limits that were in the Governor's proposed budget. This funding closes a budget gap of \$10 million and supports city and town budgets so they can administer the program lawfully.

HEALTH CARE

MaineCare providers reimbursed

MaineCare (our Medicaid program) keeps our communities healthy, supports our hospitals, and provides health care to around 400,000 Mainers with low-income.

The legislature was divided along partisan lines over funding to pay providers for MaineCare services that had already been carried out. Republican lawmakers wanted to cut MaineCare by reducing eligibility for adults. Democrats tried to find a bipartisan agreement, but ultimately passed a majority “continuing services” budget which sent funds to health care providers in June.

MEJ strongly supported this move to make sure hospitals and clinics stay open in our rural communities.

Free Care strengthened

Free Care (hospital charity care) helps low-income and uninsured Mainers get medical care they otherwise could not afford. MEJ worked closely with Consumers for Affordable Health Care to pass LD 1937, a bill to increase income eligibility for free care to 200% of the federal poverty level (FPL) and to cap monthly payment plans for those earning below 400% FPL. This means more Mainers will have access to Free Care and fair payment plans to avoid medical debt.

Medical debt reporting prohibited

Fear of medical debt can keep people from seeking lifesaving care, and medical debt on your credit report can also hurt your chances for housing, employment, and future economic security. MEJ supported passage of LD 558, which prohibits reporting of medical debt to credit agencies in Maine and is a victory for consumers.



IMMIGRANT ACCESS

Defended immigrants' rights and protected state resources

Federal challenges to immigrants' rights have been met with strong pushback in Maine, including challenges to accessing public benefits and using local law enforcement resources for federal immigration priorities. MEJ supported LD 1971, to clarify the role of Maine law enforcement and protect our public safety resources. This bill

passed the legislature and is waiting on the governor's desk; she could sign into law or veto it when the legislature convenes again in 2026.

We're also celebrating a big win for farmworkers in Maine, passage of LD 589. After many years of advocacy, these essential workers will finally have to be paid at least Maine's minimum wage.

RACIAL EQUITY

Supported tribal sovereignty

The Wabanaki Nations in Maine have fought long and hard for self-governance, a right enjoyed by many federally recognized tribes in the U.S. MEJ advocates for this right alongside members of the Wabanaki Alliance.

Among other bills, the Alliance is advocating for LD 785 which would modernize the 1980 Settlement Act using the recommendations of a bipartisan task force. The legislature could hear this bill in 2026, and if passed, Maine tribes would have better access to healthcare, expanded environmental protection, and economic advantages.

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ORGANIZING AND LEADERSHIP TEAMS

Building a community where all of us have a say in the laws that shape our state, no matter our background or income, is at the heart of everything we do at MEJ. In 2025, our community continues to connect, grow, and train with this in mind.

MEJ's Leadership Teams dedicated to housing and TANF-ASPIRE are growing. These groups of Mainers who are experts on poverty, oppression, and resilience are also blossoming into experts on policy and advocacy in ways that amaze us every day.

The teams' overall goal is to get more resources to more people with more dignity. This year, they advocated for funding the Eviction Prevention Program, increasing Maine's Child Tax Credit, ending the privatization of public benefit programs, and tax fairness. We spoke up, shared stories and offered solutions to lawmakers.



We welcomed some strong, resilient, and skilled leaders as well! Tabetha Thomas, Kelli Austin, Cori Cantrell, and April Tardiff joined leadership teams, and dozens of others joined the wider Equal Justice Partners' Circle (EJPC). Selma Tinta and Belinda Vemba traveled to Washington, D.C. in March to learn about housing policy, and met with Maine's congressional delegation. In April, Susan Kiralis, an ASPIRE Leadership Team and EJPC member and Vice President of MEJ's Board of Directors, and Kathy Stewart, an EJPC member who played a big part in the fight for Medicaid expansion, also went to

Washington, D.C. to make the case to protect SNAP and Medicaid.

This summer the EJPC met to decide what their next victory will look like (because together we will win!) and to advise MEJ about the priorities that they and their neighbors need us to stand firm on and fight for.

Cuts to programs, the dehumanization of our immigrant friends and neighbors, and a growing gap between those with resources and those without can feel overwhelming—but in these dark moments, it is easier than ever to find our allies, shining bright against the darkness.



WELCOME NEW STAFF!



Sam Heck
Development & Finance Director

A lifelong Mainer, Sam has worked in fundraising for nonprofit for nearly 20 years and recently completed a Master of Public Administration. He's an avid hiker, kayaker, home brewer, and board game enthusiast. He lives in Portland with his wife Katie and their dog Mike.



Houssein Mouhoumed
Paralegal

Houssein comes to MEJ with over five years of experience in social services, with a particular focus on housing. Originally from Djibouti in East Africa, he now calls Westbrook home. Houssein enjoys long-distance running, hiking, playing soccer, and peaceful walks by the ocean.



Suzy Young
Unemployment Insurance Navigator, PWN Project

Suzy brings such a passion in Unemployment Insurance, a commitment to making it accessible for all and real clarity of the power of peer support and navigation. Suzy lives in Troy with her family (including many furry friends!) and is an incredibly talented fiber artist.

LEGAL SERVICES

In the last year, our legal services team worked on 421 cases to help families across Maine.

This representation helps families access public benefits and maintain safe and stable housing by providing legal defense in evictions.

MEJ's legal team also uses impact litigation to bring systemic change to Maine's safety net.

We are currently litigating several cases including: determining the eligibility of asylum seekers to receive transitional TANF ASPIRE benefits; ensuring DHHS provides oversight to municipal GA programs; and prohibiting municipalities from discriminating against low-income residents and people of color.

Through a grant from HUD, we are increasing our capacity to provide legal services to people who are not eligible for help from other providers and to expand eviction and housing services in the coming years.

BUILD HOPE

In 2025 so far, MEJ's Build HOPE project has provided 245 income-eligible student parents with \$495,611.

The Build HOPE project provides flexible cash gifts and information on other educational support programs to help families meet their needs and students achieve their goals.

The top two most pressing needs student parents come to the project for are transportation and housing.

PWN PROJECT

The Peer Workforce Navigator (PWN) project was established as pilot program bringing together community organizations with the Maine Dept of Labor (MDOL) to improve the reach of workforce support and readiness programs statewide.

The PWN project helped clients access unemployment support more easily and find new jobs more quickly. Peer navigators have built trust between communities and state agencies, and helped clients connect with housing, food, and other work supports.

Now, we are proud that Governor Janet Mills signed LD 1956 into law in June, establishing a long-term peer workforce navigation program!

The new law, which will be implemented in October, will also

help more people connect with Maine's Competitive Skill Scholarship Program (CSSP) for low-income workers. PWN looks forward to continuing our collaboration with the MDOL to increase economic security and opportunity in Maine.

The success of LD 1956 is thanks to strong advocacy, powerful testimony, and the support of sponsor Sen. Peggy Rotundo.

PWN has been busy in 2025, increasing outreach to unemployed immigrant workers at State CareerCenters. Staff, along with MEJ interns and volunteers, have increased PWN's capacity to take walk-in appointments and support navigators at ProsperityME, one of PWN's partner organizations. We have also piloted CSSP application clinics with state and regional partners to help participants connect to support services as they complete union apprenticeship programs.



OUR SUPPORTERS HELP MAKE MAINE EQUAL JUSTICE'S WORK POSSIBLE

Maine Equal Justice is more than lawyers or policy experts—we're a movement of and for Mainers who know poverty firsthand. We celebrate what we've accomplished together—and we feel the fire that reminds us we can't accept a system that harms the people we love. It takes all of us to build the future our communities need and deserve.

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 are critical for us, and convenient for many supporters.

You can make a contribution using the envelope provided or by visiting MaineEqualJustice.org/donate-online. Members of the Maine Bar can support MEJ through the Campaign for Justice at CampaignForJustice.org.



Maine Equal Justice

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126 SEWALL STREET
AUGUSTA, ME 04330-6822

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