



Maine Equal Justice
People Policy Solutions

ESSENTIAL JUSTICE

SUMMER 2024



IN THIS ISSUE

JUSTICE IN BLOOM

LEGISLATIVE SESSION
IN REVIEW

NEW STAFF

TEAM UPDATES

STAFF

Kate Brennan, *Organizing and Community Outreach Director*

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

Alex Carter, *Policy Advocate*

Heather Cimellaro, *Office Manager*

Katie Collins, *Paralegal*

Ann Danforth, *Senior Policy Advocate*

Allina Diaz, *Community Organizer*

Frank D'Alessandro, Esq., *Legal Services Director*

Kate Fahey, *Peer Workforce Navigator Project Director*

Oriana Farnham, Esq., *Staff Attorney*

Moriah Geer, *Build HOPE Advisor and Community Liaison*

Susan Hamlett, *Paralegal*

Christine Hastedt, *Senior Policy Advisor*

Deb Ibonwa, Esq., *Staff Attorney*

Kathy Kilrain del Rio, *Advocacy and Programs Director*

Kelsey Lee, *Peer Workforce Navigator Project Case Advocate*

Dina Malual, *Policy Advocate*

Emily Manter, *Director of Donor Engagement*

Robyn Merrill, Esq., *Executive Director*

Sylvie Motoum, *Peer Workforce Navigator Project Clinic Navigator*

Nellie Nowak, *Administrative Assistant*

Matt Scese, *Development and Finance Director*

Heather Sheppard, *Build HOPE Director*

Jackie Stearns, *Operations Director*

Andrea Steward, *Policy Advocate*

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The end of this session marks a time to reflect on our collective achievements, celebrate our victories, and recognize the work that still lies ahead.

As the legislative session has closed and we transition into the warmth and promise of summer, I am reminded of the power of change and growth that each new season brings.

This session was marked by hard-won victories that reflect our collective commitment to economic security and equity. We made gains for people facing impossible housing costs. Additionally, families receiving TANF will see a meaningful increase in their monthly benefit. That said, we know much more is needed. We remain committed to securing more income and opportunity for families, enabling them to move beyond survival and enjoy the freedoms that come with economic security.

Impacted community members played a crucial role in these legislative successes. The ASPIRE Leadership Team's testimony on our TANF bill left a profound impact on the Health and Human Services committee, resulting in a unanimous vote out of committee. The Housing Leadership Team's presence at the State House was pivotal in ensuring rent relief was included in the budget, underscoring the power of their advocacy and action.

Our legal services team has also been instrumental this year, working to help families across Maine access income support, food assistance, health care, and housing. By providing legal defense in evictions and partnering with the Peer Workforce Navigator (PWN) clinics, our legal advocates continue to fill gaps in Maine's social safety net while pushing for economic justice and systemic change at the State House.

Despite these advancements, we also faced significant disappointments. The Governor's veto of LD 2273, which would have provided equitable pay and safe work environments for farmworkers, was a serious setback. Moreover, thirty-five bills failed to become law at the end of the session after the Governor declined to sign them, arguing that enacting them on veto day was impermissible, a view that was contested.

While we have much to celebrate, we know that our work is far from complete. This session demonstrated the strength and resilience of our community as we navigated numerous challenges to achieve these successes. We will continue to fight for the economic security and equity that all Mainers deserve.

Thank you for your continued support and for being part of this journey with us.



In solidarity,

Robyn Merrill, *Executive Director*



JUSTICE WAS IN FULL BLOOM ON MAY 30TH IN FREEPORT, MAINE

We are delighted to share highlights from our recent **Justice in Bloom** event, a special occasion that brought together so many wonderful friends to celebrate our roots and cultivate our future. It felt so good to gather with our community, **honor our Equal Justice Heroes for 2024**, and express our gratitude to Chris Hastedt as she plans to retire as our Senior Policy Advisor after 54 years of tireless and effective advocacy.

Our event, held at Maine Beer Co. in Freeport, was a fertile ground for our community to connect, share stories, and celebrate the tremendous impact of our co-founders, Chris Hastedt and Mary Henderson. We were thrilled to present Chris and Mary with the Pro Bono Equal Justice Hero Award.

In 1996, Mary and Chris co-founded Maine Equal Justice Project after their prior employer, Pine Tree Legal Assistance, was restricted from doing systemic legal advocacy on behalf of low-income people. With support from the judiciary, legal community, and broader public, they planted the seeds of Maine Equal Justice to continue advancing the rights of low-income individuals across all three branches of government. Mary served as our first Executive Director, and Chris as our first Public Policy Director.

Mary and Chris infused Maine Equal



Justice with the belief that those directly impacted by poverty are experts in their own lives who can identify the best policy solutions to eliminate poverty. Their dedication and innovative thinking have been instrumental in driving our mission forward. It was evident to our staff and board that honoring them with this award was the perfect way to acknowledge their outstanding service and unwavering commitment to justice and equity in Maine.

The Justice in Bloom event was a joyous gathering and we were delighted to see so many supporters, organizational partners, former and current staff and board members, and Equal Justice Partner Circle members come together, deepening our collective bond to our work and to each other.

The evening was filled with heartfelt moments, laughter, song, and

meaningful connections, leaving us with a renewed sense of purpose and connection to our mission. Most importantly, Chris and Mary felt deeply appreciated and celebrated, and we all came away feeling more connected and inspired.

Thank you to everyone who made Justice in Bloom such a treasured occasion. Your presence and support mean the world to us as we continue striving for justice and equity in Maine.

MOXIE FUND

Chris may be retiring, but her moxie and creative problem solving will carry forward in Maine Equal Justice's work. We will continue to bring her tenacity, passion, and trust in people to the work every day and we will continue to grow our power and impact with your help!

Chris has been at this work for 54 years. We'd love to have 54 people who appreciate her tireless efforts make a gift to MEJ through the Moxie Fund in Chris' honor. If you can be one of them, you can give online or by mail. Thank you!



LEGISLATIVE UPDATES

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

HOUSING

Rent relief passed

In late April, the legislature passed a supplemental budget bill that included \$18 million for a rent relief pilot program, a move that was celebrated by Maine renters and housing justice advocates!

When it passed, Rina Rengouwa, a member of the Maine Equal Justice Housing Leadership Team and President of the Gabonese Community in Maine said:

“There are big things left to do but this is a great start! We are grateful for [legislators’] continued support to keep rent relief a priority in the legislature.”

The rent relief pilot program will be run by Maine Housing and will provide up to \$800 a month for each family who qualifies. It will support



Maine families with low incomes (below 60% AMI, which is \$49,852 for a family of three) who are not already being helped by other programs like federal housing choice vouchers, also known as Section 8. The program is intended to support people with low income, many of whom are single parents and caregivers, Mainers with disabilities, older Mainers on fixed incomes, people who work essential

but low-paying jobs, and students. It’s funded for two years, with the potential to be extended.

While we’ve made significant gains this session in housing, we know it’s not enough. We celebrate these incredible achievements together, while also holding space for the collective work still to be done to ensure housing security for all Mainers.



GENERAL ASSISTANCE (GA)

Trauma-informed care now required

GA helps people meet their basic needs when they are experiencing an emergency and have no other options. As the housing crisis has intensified in our state, people facing homelessness have turned to GA to stay housed.

Now law, LD 1732 ensures that staff training and services are appropriate and inclusive of all Mainers and includes trauma-informed, culturally and linguistically appropriate services administered by the Department of Health and Human Services.

INCOME SOLUTIONS

Parents lead effort to pass increase in income for families through TANF program

LD 1877 is now law – it will increase Maine’s maximum TANF grant amount by 20% (meaning a single-parent family of three could now receive \$868 per month) and provide a little more breathing room for families who are pursuing their goals.

Getting families enough resources to get beyond survival and thrive is one reason why our TANF Leadership Team (made up of parents who have participated in TANF themselves) worked with Rep. Michele Meyer (D-Eliot) to introduce LD 1877.

TANF, or Temporary Assistance for Needy Families, provides cash assistance to families with low income. TANF can help provide relief when families fall on hard times by



making funds (cash) available to help pay the bills and for necessities.

LD 1877 is not enough on its own to ensure all Maine’s families with low income have the resources to get

“beyond survival.” But after a unanimous bipartisan vote in the Health and Human Services committee, we’re celebrating the important shift this moment represents.

HEALTH CARE

Two important changes to MaineCare now in effect

- Income limits for MaineCare for Kids increased to up to 300% of the FPL (a monthly income of \$6,563 for a family of three)
- Postpartum coverage is now included for all MaineCare-covered pregnancies regardless of immigration status

These build on the past successes of the **All Means All coalition** that won coverage for kids and pregnant people who would be eligible for MaineCare but for their immigration status.

The campaign continues to broaden our base of support and engage impacted community members and leaders to work toward a more equitable future where we can all access the health care we need and deserve.

We also joined our partners in celebrating historic changes to the **Medicare Savings Program (MSP)** and fending off possible roll backs to progress. The asset test for MSP eligibility has already been removed, and new income eligibility levels are in effect as of July 1, 2024! This will help more older adults with lower incomes afford their Medicare premiums.



IMMIGRANT ACCESS

Maine joins a national movement to create the Office of New Americans (ONA)

Maine’s ONA will operate within the Office of Policy and Innovation and the Future and strives to better integrate immigrant and refugee communities into Maine’s workforce and the economy.

RACIAL EQUITY

Authority of Tribal Courts restored, giving Wababanki Nations criminal jurisdiction over certain criminal offenses on their land, and gives the Penobscot Nation the authority to regulate their drinking water

We are thrilled to witness this milestone and are filled with joy to see the Wabanaki Nations reclaim what’s rightfully theirs.

WELCOME NEW STAFF



Katie Collins
Paralegal

Katie comes to us with many years of experience in social services supporting clients in accessing and receiving benefits. She is passionate about spending time in nature, live music, and building community, especially in her current hometown of Lewiston.



Kelsey Lee
*Case Advocate,
PWN Project*

Before joining the PWN Project, Kelsey practiced immigration law for over two years after earning her Juris Doctor from the University of Maine School of Law and being admitted to the Maine Bar. She spends her free time watching reality tv and attempting to garden.



Sylvie Motoum
*Clinic Navigator,
PWN Project*

Sylvie has a B.A. in Marketing Management and over 15 years of experience in roles such as Student Advising, Refugee House Coordinating, and Case Planning in NYC. Outside of work, Sylvie enjoys traveling, spending time with family, listening to music, and relaxing in nature.



Nellie Nowak
*Administrative
Assistant*

Nellie comes to us after a decade working in healthcare administrative roles and is excited to venture into the world of nonprofits. She is from Colorado and shares her life with her wife, their corgi, and two cats, with another corgi puppy joining the family this summer.

(THANK YOU FOR) ORGANIZING WITH US

THE EQUAL JUSTICE PARTNERS CIRCLE

The Equal Justice Partners' Circle (EJPC) is the beating heart of what we do and we're excited to bring together a new cohort on Saturday, July 13th to sharpen our advocacy skills and get ready for the work ahead.

The annual gathering of the EJPC is a nurturing space that builds our confidence to speak up, that reminds us that what we need we have within us and we're in this together.

The EJPC is a state-wide network of over 100 impacted community advocates who have come together to make change with us.

The EJPC is how some of our staff and our leadership team members first got involved in advocacy work!

Out of the EJPC, we've developed two of the most incredible **leadership teams** that help us lead our priority campaigns: our Housing Leadership Team and our TANF/ASPIRE leadership team.



With their hard work and the help of EJPC members and hundreds of Maine Equal Justice supporters and allies, **they just won a 20% raise for TANF families and \$18 million in rent relief.**

There were mountains and valleys in these efforts and we are proud we were able to achieve concrete and meaningful improvements for families struggling to pay the bills and afford housing. We're also proud of all we learned and the leadership we built in the process.

We also want to recognize the efforts of our wider network of allies and supporters who showed up at rallies, signed petitions, contacted legislators, helped collect postcards, wrote letters to the editor, and provided the groundswell of support that this work demands. Thank you all!

We can shape our future together - there is much more to do to achieve our vision of economic justice and racial equity in Maine. We hope you'll join us!

LEGAL SERVICES

So far in 2024, our legal services team has worked on 266 cases to help families across Maine

These cases help families access income support (TANF), food assistance (SNAP), health care (MaineCare), and housing and other needs (General Assistance), and to

maintain safe and stable housing by providing legal defense in evictions.

In addition to filling gaps in Maine's social safety net for individuals across the state, our legal team uses impact litigation to bring systemic change to Maine's safety net. In May, Maine Equal Justice appeared before

Maine's highest state court to argue that asylum seekers should have equal access to transitional child care and transportation services when they leave TANF for the workforce.

We expect a decision for this case later this summer.

PEER WORKFORCE NAVIGATOR PROJECT

The Peer Workforce Navigator (PWN) Project is a pilot program, bringing together six community organizations in partnership with the Maine Department of Labor. Together we work to increase access to public benefits, connect people to good jobs, and promote systemic solutions that make DOL programs work better for everyone.

In our third year, the PWN Project continues to grow, as does MEJ's work as a key partner. Peer Navigators connect with community members across organizations, populations, and geographies every day, including at our workforce clinics in Lewiston, Portland and Bangor. These clinics have introduced MEJ Legal Services to a growing number of people who encounter barriers to Unemployment (UI) and other public benefits.

This spring, Food AND Medicine welcomed two new Navigators and launched the Bangor clinic/resource fair in collaboration with Wabanaki Public Health & Wellness. At this



clinic, community members can drop in, have a cup of coffee, and meet with PWN and recovery, food access, and other area resources.

To support all the great work at the clinics, Syvlie Motoum has moved from her role as ProsperityME's Navigator into a newly created position, Clinic Manager. New PWN Case Advocate Kelsey Lee brings invaluable legal expertise and ensures individuals are able to resolve UI issues and understand and enroll in DOL programs. Catherine Buxton is stepping into a new role, PWN Policy & Community Engagement Manager,

where she will lead the Project's advocacy and policy efforts. While these changes are very exciting, we are sad to say 'bon voyage' to our much-loved colleague, Peer Navigator Marcel Selemani, as he embarks on a new journey with his family in Seattle.

As we enter our final pilot year, we look ahead to the opportunity as a Project to collectively imagine the future of our work. If you want to learn more about how you can help us sustain this unique project, contact PWN Project Director, Kate Fahey, kate@workforcenavigator.org.

OUR SUPPORTERS HELP MAKE MAINE EQUAL JUSTICE'S WORK POSSIBLE

We celebrate what we've been able to do together and we also feel the fire inside us that reminds us we cannot accept the way things are and the way the system continues to harm the people we love. It takes all of us to make the changes our communities need and deserve. We hope you'll recommit to this work with us by making a contribution if you can.

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 are critical for us, and convenient for many supporters.



Maine Equal Justice

People Policy Solutions

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