



## PRESS RELEASE

### CONTACT

Mary Erin Casale (Gideon)

207.415.4965

[mcasale@bernsteinshur.com](mailto:mcasale@bernsteinshur.com)

Alison Weiss (Maine Equal Justice)

207.232.0859

[aweiss@mejp.org](mailto:aweiss@mejp.org)

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***Build HOPE Project at Maine Equal Justice Celebrates First Anniversary***  
*Established by a \$3.5 million investment from Sara Gideon, the program has moved over 200 families closer to economic stability*

AUGUSTA – One year in and the Build HOPE project at Maine Equal Justice (MEJ) has helped pave the road to economic stability for just over 200 families struggling to meet basic needs. In 2022, Sara Gideon announced a contribution of leftover campaign funds from her US Senate race to establish the Build HOPE Project. The mission was clear - build economic opportunity for parents today and their children tomorrow, creating pathways out of poverty to help working parents complete their post-secondary degrees or credential program.

In its first year, the project has invested \$530,000 to provide essential supports and unlock opportunities for parents and caretakers pursuing education and training as a pathway out of poverty. The most requested support is for utilities, transportation needs, and housing.

**Moriah Geer, Director of the [Build HOPE Project](#) at MEJ**, says the impact of the Fund is multiplied because families are able to explore additional opportunities to further their career development. “It's truly been an honor this past year to listen to people and talk to them about their needs and goals. We make sure they are connected to supports that can sustain them into the future. Being a low income

parent and getting an education at the same time is not a quick and easy thing; they're in for a long journey and it's so important that we make sure they have access to all the tools available to them.”

**Sara Gideon, former Speaker of the Maine House**, says “During my time in the Maine Legislature, I worked closely with Maine Equal Justice, enacting real reforms to help move people out of poverty and into the workforce. But those big policy successes could be derailed by something as unexpected as a broken-down vehicle or a spike in oil prices. Over the past year, the Build HOPE Project has surpassed all expectations. We are so proud of the impact this work is having on working parents earning their degree, to their children -- and ultimately to the entire state -- by increasing the numbers of higher skilled workers badly needed by Maine’s employers and our economy.”

Build HOPE has helped many parents who are completing their education while supporting their families. “With the help from [Build HOPE funds in 2022] I got caught up on my bills,” says one **Build HOPE recipient, a single mom and domestic violence survivor who lives in Western Maine** and is caring for children with complex health needs while putting herself through school. “It was literally life changing, that sounds dramatic, but it was. Just getting caught up made a huge difference. I was able to focus on my classes and I passed all of my classes.”

**Emily Levesque Hooey, a full time medical assistant student who lives in Easton**, says that Build HOPE funds have helped keep a roof over her head, one of the top needs applicants now look for as Maine confronts rapidly rising rents. “It’s helped with some of the hardest times I’ve seen. It made our holidays better, that’s for sure. On Christmas we didn’t have to worry about not having a place to live or anything, we were able to pay our rent and it was such a stress relief. It wasn’t about being able to buy stuff, it was having a place to live.”

In 2018, Gideon sponsored legislation that established the [Higher Opportunity Pathways to Employment \(HOPE\) program](#), which is administered by the Department of Health and Human Services. HOPE is currently available to families with incomes at or below 185% of the federal poverty level pursuing a post-secondary degree or credential that has at least an average job outlook as identified by the Department of Labor. This program is an important tool in efforts to increase Maine’s health care workforce, as two primary areas of focus for HOPE participants are in the behavioral health field and nursing. As of January, the HOPE program is serving 464 parents.

While HOPE provides critical support that can enable parents and caregivers to go back to school and succeed, some students still struggle to make ends meet over the

course of their program. A [survey](#) conducted by the Department of Health and Human Services supported the need for this emergency fund, finding that 83% of HOPE students have difficulty making ends meet at the end of each month, and 59% of them are just \$100-\$300 short of what they need to make ends meet on their family budget.

“The HOPE Program provides critical support to low-income parents working their way through school. Help with child care, transportation, and books and supplies can make the difference when it comes to success completing a degree,” said **Robyn Merrill, executive director at Maine Equal Justice**. “But we also know there are gaps in support in the current program that can work to derail parents’ successful completion. This project includes research that will provide policymakers with reliable evidence that can inform long-term, systemic policy improvements to increase economic opportunities for families. So Build HOPE makes a big difference for the hundreds of families participating, but will also create opportunities for thousands more like them in the future through improved public policy.”

For more information about HOPE, Parents as Scholars, or the Build HOPE Project, visit [www.maineequaljustice.org](http://www.maineequaljustice.org).

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