



## Maine Equal Justice Legislative Priorities for 2021

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Maine Equal Justice has identified legislative priorities as of January 2021. As more bills are printed and the legislative session moves forward, we may add additional priority bills that would work to increase economic security, opportunity, and equity to this list at our website, [www.mainequaljustice.org](https://www.mainequaljustice.org).

### Health Care Legislation:

- LR 1172 - An Act To Promote Cost-effectiveness in the MaineCare Program and Improve the Oral Health of Maine Adults and Children (Sponsor: Rep. Ryan Fecteau) *Staff contact:* [kkilraindelrio@mejp.org](mailto:kkilraindelrio@mejp.org)

Dental care IS health care—our mouths are part of our bodies! For too long, Maine has been in the minority of states that do not offer full dental care for adults who have health care through Medicaid. This bill will ensure that adults with low income can access the dental care they need to be healthy and successful, including preventive, diagnostic and restorative care. It will bring \$17 million in federal matching funds to Maine each year, while reducing emergency care spending by \$4 million in the state budget.

- LR 1781 - An Act To Improve the Health of Maine Residents By Closing Coverage Gaps in MaineCare and the Children's Health Insurance Program (Sponsor: Rep. Rachel Talbot Ross) *Staff contact:* [kkilraindelrio@mejp.org](mailto:kkilraindelrio@mejp.org)

In the middle of a pandemic and recession, it's more clear than ever that our collective safety and our economic recovery are tied to each person's ability to get to the doctor or fill a prescription. Maine is a stronger, healthier, and more resilient state when everyone has health care, including our family, friends, neighbors, and coworkers who are immigrants. This bill will ensure that all Maine residents with low income have access to MaineCare coverage. This bill would be a huge step in the fight for a health care system that works for all of us.

### Housing Legislation:

- LR 873 An Act To Prevent Homelessness by Establishing an Eviction Mediation Program (Sponsor: Sen. Anne Carney) *Staff contact:* [rliscord@mejp.org](mailto:rliscord@mejp.org)

Maine has a longstanding housing affordability crisis that has been made tragically worse by the pandemic, but we have an opportunity in 2021 to take

significant steps toward a more fair and affordable housing market for all Mainers. This bill would help people who are facing eviction find and access resources like legal aid or rental assistance, to stay housed, and the opportunity to request mediation. These changes to the legal process will give tenants more opportunities to work out a solution with their landlord or lender, before going to court.

- **LR 1419 An Act To Improve Housing Security by Improving Access to General Assistance (GA)** (Sponsor: Rep. Victoria Morales) *Staff contact:* [dibonwa@mejp.org](mailto:dibonwa@mejp.org)

GA is a program run by Maine's cities and towns, and is one of Maine's most important supports for people facing housing insecurity. This bill improves GA to help more people get stable housing. The bill helps shelters that provide emergency housing to Mainers with consistent financial support from General Assistance to ensure shelter is available for those who need it. The bill also helps Mainers accessing GA find stable homes by helping them get other kinds of rental assistance as their incomes increase instead of suddenly cutting them off from General Assistance as they begin to earn more (the so-called "cliff" effect).

- **LR 1421 An Act To Create the Maine Rental Assistance Program** (Sponsor Rep. Victoria Morales) *Staff contact:* [rliscord@mejp.org](mailto:rliscord@mejp.org)

Even before the pandemic, thousands of Maine households faced eviction, foreclosure, or homelessness, even people who have secured federal housing vouchers but could not find safe and affordable places to live. The pandemic has made this problem tragically worse. This bill would provide financial help for up to 1,000 Maine households and establish a network of housing counselors across the state to help people find and keep stable housing. By helping Mainers find housing, including those with federal housing vouchers, housing counselors will ensure Maine doesn't leave these federal housing funds on the table when so many Mainer's can't afford rent.

- **LR 1582 An Act To Prohibit Discrimination in Housing Based on a Person's Source of Income** (Sponsor: Rep. Benjamin Collings). *Staff contact:* [rliscord@mejp.org](mailto:rliscord@mejp.org)

About 500 Maine households who have Section 8 vouchers (federal housing assistance) are unable to use their vouchers for a variety of reasons. Even during the pandemic, many landlords have refused to participate in rental relief programs, depriving tenants of their ability to stabilize their housing situations. One of the reasons that this happens is that Maine landlords may refuse to rent to tenants who have Section 8 vouchers and are not required to participate in rental assistance programs, including General Assistance. This bill would require landlords to participate in Section 8 and other rental assistance programs.

## Legislation to Change Systems that Cause Racial Inequity:

- LD 2 - An Act To Require the Inclusion of Racial Impact Statements in the Legislative Process (Sponsor: Representative Rachel Talbot Ross) *Staff contact:* [jthoyalil@mejp.org](mailto:jthoyalil@mejp.org)

“Racial impact statements” are a powerful tool for addressing racial disparities through law making. They give policymakers information that allows them to consider the impacts of future laws on racial, indigenous, and tribal populations. Discussions around race have never been a central part of crafting legislation in Maine and as such, there's never been a process to guide those conversations or to analyze racial impact when bills are being considered.

LD 2 would add racial impact statements into the legislative process for bills that could have a potential impact on historically disadvantaged racial groups. The Legislative Council would conduct a study to decide the best method to move forward with racial impact statements for the 2022 legislative session. We are excited by the prospect of Maine joining at least seven other states with legislatures that have established, or taken steps toward establishing, the use of racial impact statements.

- LR 436 - An Act Regarding the Permanent Commission (Sponsor: The Permanent Commission on the Status of Racial, Indigenous and Maine Tribal Populations) *Staff contact:* [jthoyalil@mejp.org](mailto:jthoyalil@mejp.org)

The Permanent Commission on the Status of Racial, Indigenous and Maine Tribal Populations was formed in 2019 to examine racial disparities across all systems and improve opportunities and outcomes for historically disadvantaged racial, indigenous, and tribal populations in the state. The Permanent Commission is a valuable vehicle to help Maine grapple with and address its centuries-long history of racism and colonization. Maine Equal Justice strongly supported its establishment.

To carry out research, public engagement, advising the government, and more, the Permanent Commission has submitted this bill for funding to hire staff to continue its important work. This is a brand new commission with no institutional history or infrastructure to build on, and commissioners serve in their roles on a volunteer basis and have other jobs. With temporary staff support this past summer, members of the commission were able to embark on an ambitious process to review hundreds of bills and to issue recommendations to the legislature. This bill will provide the Permanent Commission with the funding necessary to secure dedicated staffing and administrative support to continue this work and fulfill its imperative mission.

## Consumer Rights Legislation:

- LR 1032 - An Act To Increase Protections for Option Contracts (Sponsor: Rep. Thom Harnett) *Staff contact:* [frank@mejp.org](mailto:frank@mejp.org)

Option contracts are a predatory consumer product that entice people with low incomes into agreements for substandard housing that provide the illusion of homeownership, sometimes called 'land installment contracts'. This bill would provide protections for people who enter into option contracts similar to those provided to homeowners in foreclosure cases. The bill also includes protections for consumers who enter into rent-to-own contracts and enables consumers to receive compensation through the courts if sellers violate the law.

- **LR 1842 - An Act To Enact the Maine Data Collection Protection Act (Sponsor: Rep. Tavis Hasenfus)** *Staff contact: [frank@mejp.org](mailto:frank@mejp.org)*

The State of Maine Courts are about to go to an electronic filing system. This will lead to the creation of electronically stored judicial records. In other states where this has happened, it has resulted in blackballing of tenants in eviction cases making it almost impossible to find new housing. To help protect Mainers from data collectors, this bill will limit the ability of landlords, employers, lenders, and others to use electronically stored judicial records to hurt a consumers' access to housing, employment, and credit. Specifically, it will prohibit the use of electronic court records in cases where there was no wrongdoing by the consumer and for all records during the COVID-19 public health emergency.

- **LR 957 - An Act To Amend the Maine Fair Debt Collection Practices Act (Sponsor: Sen. Heather Sanborn)** *Staff contact: [frank@mejp.org](mailto:frank@mejp.org)*

This bill would prevent abusive lawsuits brought by third-party debt buyers that lead to court judgments against consumers, despite unreliable evidence that a debt is even owed. Specifically, the bill would prevent debt buyers from suing consumers in small claims court and require them to provide reliable information when bringing a legal action against a consumer. The bill would also prevent medical debt collection if the consumer is eligible for hospital free care and help reduce the number of people in Maine who have medical debts they can probably never repay.

- **LR 349 An Act To Expand the Types of Property Exempt from Attachment and Execution (Sponsor: Rep. Denise Tepler)** *Staff contact: [frank@mejp.org](mailto:frank@mejp.org)*

If you get sued in court, a judge may order you to pay money to the other party. If you don't have the money to pay the amount you owe, a judge can order you to make payments out of your assets or your income. Some property is exempt from these orders, such as a portion of the value of a person's home or car. In addition, some kinds of income are exempt from garnishment, such as disability income or a portion of a person's earnings. But Maine has some of the least generous exemptions in the country, and they haven't been increased since 2007. This bill would increase the amount of property and earnings that would be exempt from orders to pay creditors, allowing Mainers in debt to have more income to pay for basic necessities like food, shelter, and heat

## Unemployment Insurance Legislation:

- An Act to Strengthen the Unemployment Insurance System To Better Serve Maine Workers (Sponsor: Rep. Ryan Fecteau) *Staff contact:* [chastedt@mejp.org](mailto:chastedt@mejp.org)

Unemployment insurance (UI) should keep workers afloat when they fall on hard times and lose their job because of factors outside of their control. Unfortunately, the pandemic exposed a system that has become dysfunctional through years of neglect. This bill requires Maine's Department of Labor (DoL) to examine how well our UI system is meeting the needs of today's workforce and economy, set goals for program improvement, and measure yearly progress. It also requires the Department to review staffing capacity and report what they find to the Labor & Housing Committee and creates a navigator program to increase program access for underserved workers. Finally, it makes several changes in law that will improve access to benefits for part-time workers who lose wages; prevent disqualification of people facing crises that cause job loss, like a loss of childcare or transportation; ensure that workers losing their jobs receive notice about unemployment benefits that may be available and assistance in applying for those benefits; and provides the first increase in the unemployment dependent benefit for families with children in 30 years.

## Civil Legal Aid Funding:

- LR 1335 - An Act to Improve Access to Justice through Civil Legal Aid (Sponsor: Rep. Barbara Cardone) *Staff contact:* [rmerrill@mejp.org](mailto:rmerrill@mejp.org)

Civil legal aid provides access to legal help for people to protect their livelihoods, their health, and their families when they cannot afford it on their own. This bill increases funding for civil legal aid services to support access to justice that would be distributed through the Civil Legal Services Fund Commission. Improved funding would move Maine toward reaching the [National Justice Index](#) standard of 10 legal aid lawyers per 10,000 low income persons by 2031. Additional funding in 2021 will also help to address shortfalls arising from the disruption of the economy due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

## Legislation to Reduce Child Poverty:

- LD 78 - An Act To Protect Children from Extreme Poverty by Preserving Children's Access to Temporary Assistance for Needy Families Benefits (Sponsor: Rep. Michele Meyer) *Staff contact:* [adanforth@mejp.org](mailto:adanforth@mejp.org)

Families who are struggling to make ends meet need steady financial support, especially kids. Under current law, the Maine Department of Health and Human Services cuts off financial assistance for an entire family receiving Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF), including children, if the children's parent is sanctioned for a second time for not complying with certain requirements of the TANF program. This practice of punishing the entire family

harms children and families by completely eliminating their assistance, leaving families without income to pay their rent or purchase food and everyday necessities. Sanctions are often simple mistakes based on misunderstandings. Research has shown that this policy disproportionately harms people with disabilities, including mental health problems, and does little to increase work participation. This bill would eliminate “full family sanctions,” authorizing DHHS to stop assistance only for the non-compliant parent, and ensuring other family members continue to receive essential financial help.