

May 3, 2013

Testimony in **SUPPORT** of LD 1343

Dear members of the Health and Human Services Committee;

My name is Dee Clarke and I live in Portland. I'm sorry that I could not attend today's public hearing but I have a work obligation that I could not change. As a mom and a neighbor who cares a lot about the wellness of my community, I ask you to give your strong support to LD 1343.

I raised my three children as a single mom, and I was grateful to receive Temporary Assistance for Needy Families. I received TANF for a little over five years. Throughout that time I repeatedly tried to work. I tried many, many jobs but my disability always prevented me from being successful. I was never able to keep a job longer than 3 weeks although I really tried. As a result, I was repeatedly penalized for not being able to follow through with my Aspire requirements. I would often go in to see my caseworker and beg her to let me sign up for a particular work training or class that I had heard about or they would say, "We'd like you to try this" and I'd say, "Sure". I'd get excited, feel real hopeful and couldn't wait for the training but then I'd always fail. I couldn't be consistent because my illness was so serious. I became increasingly frustrated each time that I was not able to follow through on one of these commitments. Numerous times I had to plead with my worker not to sanction me. It was terrible.

It was finally my children's day care worker who noticed my increasing sickness and referred me to the onsite social worker who then quickly referred me to an outstanding psychologist. I am so grateful for that day. I had known I was sick and something was wrong, but had no clue as to what it was. That professional finally helped me to understand my disability and what would be needed for me to get back on my feet which we knew would be a long road. He helped me complete an application for Social Security disability and SSI benefits and helped me develop the medical documentation necessary for my application to be successful.

I needed TANF in the first place not just because I was a single parent, but because I was struggling with some very serious and long standing mental health problems that eventually led to my receiving SSI. My Mom had a serious undiagnosed mental illness and I spent a lot of my childhood in foster care. Had my condition been appropriately assessed earlier by TANF, and had I gotten help earlier in applying for SSI my family would have been better off and the State

would have saved critical dollars that could have been used to help others. Getting SSI made all the difference in my and my children's lives, not only by providing me with secure income but as importantly it enabled me to get treatment for my disability and services for my family to help them be healthy.

Getting the appropriate assessment for my problems helped me to access other resources in my community and helped me get the services I needed to finally be able to work myself. I was able to connect with a wonderful caseworker at Catholic Charities, accessed Vocational Rehabilitation, and went to classes and groups that gave me a chance to understand that other moms are living in similar situations and making it work and that, with help, so could I.

With that help I've now been able to maintain a part-time job for 14 years. I continue to work closely with Voc Rehab and have taken grant writing classes and am working with community partners around sex trafficking and exploitation of teens and women. I plan to write a grant that enables me to speak at various organizations that may come in contact with high-risk youth and women. And I'm so proud to say that today my kids are all doing well: my oldest daughter lives and works in California, my son earned his Ph.D. from Stanford and became a medical doctor, and my youngest daughter, who has had health problems, is finishing college soon.

Please vote in support of LD 1343. If we want to help Maine families struggling to move out of poverty, then we need to provide them with the tools to understand and overcome their barriers.