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State of Maine  
 ONE HUNDRED AND TWENTY-SIXTH LEGISLATURE  
 COMMITTEE ON HEALTH AND HUMAN SERVICES

To: Senator Dawn Hill, Chair  
 Representative Margaret R. Rotundo, Chair  
 Joint Standing Committee on Appropriations and Financial Affairs

From: Senator Margaret M. Craven, Chair *MC*  
 Representative Richard R. Farnsworth, Chair *RF*

Date: May 21, 2013

Re: General Assistance budget recommendations and work group report

As Chairs of the Health and Human Services Committee, we would like to provide some further information regarding the proposals for General Assistance contained in the budget and in the change package and how they differ from the recommendations in the Work Group on General Assistance created under PL 2011, c. 655, Pt R.

As you know, the Health and Human Services Committee was divided over the proposals in the budget regarding General Assistance. The budget proposal for General Assistance was incomplete with only the language portion in Part OO included in the budget document. The Committee received some information on the change package during its deliberations on the biennial budget. We are concerned that the proposals contained in the original Part OO and the change package were not in the recommendations of the Work Group: reducing reimbursement for all towns to 50%; reducing the maximum benefit by 10%; limiting housing assistance to 270 days; excluding TANF 60 month closures from eligibility; and excluding TANF sanctioned cases from eligibility. Some of these proposals were voted on by the work group and rejected by the majority while others were not even considered. Only the addition in the change package of making fugitives from justice ineligible for General Assistance was a unanimous recommendation of the Work Group. Consequently, the majority of the Health and Human Services Committee opposed Part OO, partly on the grounds that these proposals had been rejected by the Work Group.

According to the Department of Health and Human Services, administrative savings totaling \$661,404 over the biennium can be achieved and therefore reduce the baseline request. These proposals are: implementing a community support program which would move people receiving General Assistance out of shelters into permanent supportive housing; better utilization of alternative aid; access to the state's electronic database; uniformity in administration of TANF limit extensions; and VA benefit savings from the SOAR pilot.

Three of these recommendations were unanimous and the other two had one abstention or opposed vote. Our understanding was that allowing access to the state's electronic database required a statutory change although this does not appear in the budget. We would be interested in knowing if these administrative and non-statutory changes have actually been implemented.

There are several unanimous and majority recommendations in the Work Group report and proposed legislation that would improve the General Assistance program and/or save money. For example, there are proposals that impact the assessment of income that have not been included in the budget, such as counting unemployment insurance when the client lost unemployment benefits due to fraud, and including lump sum payments and circuit breaker benefits as income. A majority of the Work Group also made recommendations that relate to extensions of TANF or SNAP for hardship or when job availability is unfavorable. None of these recommendations appear in the budget or the change package. There are also a number of recommendations that relate to standardizing forms, emergencies, and reimbursement forms for data collection although we understand that these proposals do not save money and therefore may not be included in a budget document.

We hope you find this information useful.