



Slashing the Safety Net in Lean Times

"Everything is being cut, consistently and constantly every year"

By: Andy O'Brien – November 21, 2013

"Once you start poor, it is hard to scratch your way up," said Amy, a Belfast resident whose name has been changed to protect her privacy. "If someone wanted to follow me around for one day, they'd get a whole different perspective of what I do. I'm not lazy. I'm not sitting around watching TV and eating bonbons. I'm actually out there working, doing my homework, taking care of the kids and driving them everywhere. They don't understand that they're making laws on things that they have no idea what it's like."

It had been a rough week for the 34-year-old single mother of three. Normally, just getting by was a struggle as she juggled six college classes and odd jobs, looked after her elderly grandfather and took care of her three children, ages 16, 13 and 7. Then on October 31, Amy received a notice that the family's Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) benefits (formerly known as "food stamps") would be cut by \$75 a month due to sharp reductions in federal spending on the program. Shortly after, she was notified that the family would also lose their \$428 monthly Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) benefit next month due to cuts at the state level.

Then the car broke down.

Life never has been easy for Amy, which is not immediately apparent given her naturally upbeat personality. After losing both of her own parents when she was still a child, she became pregnant during her final year of high school. With no money or strong family support, college didn't seem like an option, so she went to work straight out of high school. She worked in low-wage food service and child care jobs, sometimes up to 80 hours a week to make ends meet. She married her high school boyfriend and they raised a family. Then seven years ago, the couple separated just before Amy learned she was pregnant again with their third child. With her husband not able to share custody in a way that could accommodate a work schedule and unable to afford child care, Amy said she had to look for assistance.

"I went for years without getting any help from the state, but I had to get help because I couldn't work and take care of two kids and be pregnant," she said.

The family spent one Christmas at the Rockland Hospitality House when they were homeless for a month. She has been on a waiting list for Section 8 housing ever since, though she was able to finally find subsidized housing for \$480 a month out of pocket. She is entitled to some child support money, all of which the state garnishes to reimburse itself for services provided to the family. Money is always

tight, and scraping together enough for a child's birthday present or fees for a school field trip is hard. Since first receiving TANF, Amy has held jobs and was able to get off assistance once all together, but she was laid off when the business didn't need help anymore.

"It's not like I wasn't trying to find work. It's not like I don't want to work, but because now that I've been a stay-at-home mom and in college, they don't want to hire me because I don't have experience or anything recent to put on my application," she said.

From Welfare to Workforce

A few years ago, Amy was able to take advantage of the state's Parents as Scholars program, which allows TANF recipients to pursue a college degree without losing their benefits. However, it doesn't cover tuition, which has to be paid with student loans. In 2011, Amy enrolled in an associate's degree program at the University of Maine to study mental health and human services with a concentration in children's education. The Parents as Scholars program was established in 1997 in the wake of the passage by Congress of the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act (PRWORA) or "welfare reform."

Under the 1996 law, TANF replaced the previous cash assistance program for low-income families, known as Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC), with the goal of transitioning welfare recipients to the workforce through job training and education. The law came with work requirements for the able-bodied and imposed a 60-month limit for TANF funded with federal block grant money.

Prior to 2012, Maine took advantage of a rule to use federal dollars to extend the limit for up to 20 percent of the state's caseload, but in 2011 Governor LePage and the Republican-led Legislature imposed the 60-month limit for all TANF recipients, with special exceptions for those participating in a training or education program. After weeks of stress, last week Amy was notified that she qualifies for an extension until April, though she'll still have one more semester to go in her degree program after that.

"They're leaving people in the lurch," said Amy. "Now they're just like, 'Nope, we don't care if you're going to be homeless, if you're going to be on the street, get off the system and get out.'"

Continuous "Welfare Reform"

Although Amy has been fortunate to have continued support in her education pursuits, according to a study by University of Maine sociologist Sandra Butler, many other young families have not fared very well. In a research paper published this year, Butler found that between June and October 2012, more than 1,500 Maine families, including 2,700 children, lost their TANF benefits due to the 60-month limit. According to the study, nearly 70 percent of those surveyed reported that they had gone to a food bank, about a third lost utility service, and 20 percent reported being evicted from their home, had to relocate, lived in overcrowded conditions or were forced to stay in a homeless shelter.

"From where I work now, I'm definitely seeing these issues coming up because of a lot of the programs that are being cut and sunsetted," said Thea Day, a social worker with the Salvation Army in Bangor. "Everything is being cut, consistently and constantly every year."

Day, who was once on TANF herself, says she understands the plight of single mothers, a large percentage of whom make up the TANF and SNAP rolls. Over a decade ago, Day found herself pregnant after a break-up with a boyfriend, despite the fact that doctors told her she could never bear children. Day was able to enroll in the University of Maine to study social work and scraped by on \$363 a month in cash assistance from TANF and \$296 a month in food stamps. All of her benefits and MaineCare health coverage were eventually paid back from child support payments. After paying rent she had \$193 a month in cash for her and her son to survive on, but she managed to finally earn her degree and find employment. However, she says she was fortunate because it was before cutting welfare programs became a top political priority.

In addition to TANF and food stamp cuts, she notes that heating assistance through the LIHEAP program has been cut significantly. According to the Governor's Energy Office, it costs more than \$3,000 a year to heat a home with oil, while last year the average LIHEAP benefit was less than \$700. Currently, Maine is receiving \$33.8 million in federal heating assistance funds for the 2013-14 winter season, which is about 3 percent less than last season.

Day said her job is to help families in emergency situations when they have no one else to turn to for help with basic needs like food, shelter and heat. It's a need that has exploded in recent years.

"When they made the five-year time limit, I started seeing more and more families coming in," said Day. "That is one thing that I have seen a huge change in - the use of our soup kitchens. When I first started back in 2009, I would see one or two school-age kids, maybe during a school vacation, a year. Now I'm seeing two to three babies, a couple of toddlers, and a few school-aged kids, up to 6 to 7 kids, a day."

Hunger in Maine on the Rise

The US Department of Agriculture estimates that 15 percent of Maine households, or more than 200,000 Mainers, are "food insecure," which means that they often don't have access to enough nourishment. Maine ranks 18th in the country and first in New England for food insecurity, with a child poverty rate of about 17.5 percent, according to the US Census. In spite of the existence of food vouchers like SNAP, the USDA has also found that 35 percent of Maine's food-insecure population makes too much to qualify for it. And according to Amy, these days there just isn't enough to go around at the food pantries she visits.

Kristen Miale, president of the Good Shepherd Food Bank, which is the supplier for local food pantries throughout the state, says there are several factors causing the strain on food pantries. While traditionally food pantries have relied on a lot of canned goods from mislabeled or excess grocery inventory, due to improvements in inventory systems, the stores aren't donating as much of those items. Nevertheless, GSFB is moving more food than ever and is expected to reach 14 million pounds this year, much of it fresh produce. Many food pantries, however, are not equipped to handle as much fresh food, which is a problem that she says GSFB is trying to address.

"On the other side is that the need has been higher than it's ever been before," said Miale. "What we're hearing now is that pantries used to have a little food left over after serving everyone and now they're running out before they even get through the line of people. It's not a supply issue as much as it is a demand issue."

There's also the fact that safety-net programs have not kept up with the cost of living and simply don't have the purchasing power they once did.

"They haven't adjusted anything for the prices going up," said Amy. "How do they expect us to pay for food with less food stamps when the price of food is skyrocketing?"

While Congress has cut food vouchers for Amy's family down to \$580 a month, the USDA estimates that even on the thriftiest meal plan the monthly food costs would be well over \$600 for a family the same size.

According to an October report by the Center for Budget and Policy Priorities, TANF spending fell 16 percent between 2003 and 2013. The report notes that since 1996 the average monthly TANF benefit for a single parent of three children in Maine has decreased by almost 22 percent, adjusted for inflation. Even combined with SNAP benefits, the total benefit amounts to just 62 percent of the Federal Poverty Level. The CBPP also reports that Maine's combined housing supplement and TANF benefit for a family of three (totaling \$685) is still only 81 percent of Fair Market Rent (FMR) for a two-bedroom apartment.

One of the Least Generous States in the Country

Ever since Ronald Reagan began his stump speeches using the story of the woman on Chicago's South Side with her 80 names, 30 addresses, a brand new Cadillac and \$150,000 in tax-free income from all of her ill-gotten government benefits, the "welfare queen" has been a powerful caricature used in political campaigns. Governor Paul LePage made welfare reform a center plank in his 2010 campaign, and a poll conducted a month before his election found that 56 percent of Mainers said they agree that Maine's poor have become too dependent on government assistance programs.

During his tenure as governor, in addition to the TANF cap, the governor and the Republican-led Legislature passed a law cutting off TANF benefits to individuals testing positive for drugs who were previously convicted of drug felonies, cut 24,000 low-income Mainers from the Medicaid rolls, and spent

\$700,000 to hire more welfare fraud investigators, yielding 15 successful prosecutions (up from 8 in 2010), and ordering \$104,341 in restitution. As a result of his efforts, the governor has claimed a 41-percent reduction in welfare cases. During the governor's announcement for reelection on Nov. 5, he repeated his call for more cuts in spending on programs to help the poor.

"We simply cannot afford to keep adding people to the welfare rolls and throwing money at the problem," the governor said in his weekly radio address.

But in spite of the rhetoric, the libertarian CATO Institute, which published an influential paper in the 1990s promoting welfare reform, recently announced that Maine is one of the least generous of all states in the country in providing aid to the poor. The study added up the cash value of all of the programs a welfare beneficiary could hypothetically receive in Maine - including TANF, SNAP, Medicaid and other programs - and found that Maine ranked 41st in the country and last in New England. Housing assistance was not calculated in the study because so few Maine TANF recipients - just 6.7 percent - receive housing assistance.

Women, Children and the "War on the Poor"

While public perception of welfare recipients is often shaped by anecdotes and casual observation, according to data from the Maine Department of Health and Human services, 68 percent of TANF recipients are children and of the 32 percent of adults, 78 percent of them are women.

According to a 2010 study conducted by researchers at the University of Maine and University of New England, the median age of a child receiving TANF was under two years old and the median length of time families reported receiving the aid was 18 months.

Ninety-seven percent of survey respondents had work experience, holding an average of three jobs in the past five years. 46 percent said they did not own a vehicle and 80 percent reported difficulty getting transportation when they needed it. Like Amy, 28 percent said that inability to afford child care caused them to turn to TANF and 60 percent reported work schedules that involved irregular hours, making it difficult to make child care arrangements.

This week Governor LePage announced the hiring of a controversial conservative consultant, Gary Alexander, for nearly \$1 million to study the cost of accepting federal Medicaid expansion for low-income Mainers, which the governor already opposes. Alexander has also been charged with reviewing the "cost and efficiency" of the state's welfare program. In Pennsylvania, Alexander served as the head of the state's welfare department, where his decision to cancel the health care benefits for 130,000 low-income people, including nearly 90,000 children, earned him the reputation of waging a "war on the poor" by his critics. At the federal level, House Republicans have passed a version of the Farm Bill that would cut nearly \$40 billion out of the SNAP budget, effectively denying food assistance to 2.8 million people.

Meanwhile, Amy says she's persevering in spite of the daily stress of living in poverty and the stigma associated with it.

"It is an exhausting existence," she said. "To worry every day about how you are going to put enough healthy food on the table to feed everyone, and knowing sometimes it may not happen. It makes you tired right down to your bones until you reach the point that you want to just give up. But you can't, because there are little people relying on you because they aren't old enough to fend for themselves yet. So you keep on going."