



Maine Equal Justice Partners: A Voice for Everyone >>>

Part of "Making Change Happen: Women Creating a Better Maine"

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Imagine a single, unemployed mother with a special needs child. Medicaid covers this family's medical expenses—until Mom finds a job and is told that she's no longer eligible for Medicaid. Picture an elderly man who needs daily dialysis. MaineCare covers his treatments—until he's suddenly told he's ineligible.

Where do these people turn?

To Maine Equal Justice Partners (MEJP), a nonprofit legal aid organization that's deeply committed to finding solutions to poverty and to using its legal expertise and advocacy to secure the benefits people deserve. In each case, MEJP staffers straightened everything out with just a few phone calls. The single mother was still

eligible for Medicaid, and the elderly man was still eligible for MaineCare, albeit in a different category. Both individuals' benefits were reinstated, and the State reimbursed the man for the medical bills he'd incurred without MaineCare.

These are some of the small victories MEJP wins every day. The 16-year old organization aims to improve the lives of low-income individuals in Maine and to focus on the ways that poverty affects people every day. To combat poverty, MEJP seeks to understand its causes and its ramifications and in turn help clients find their voices so they can work towards their own solutions. MEJP believes that everybody has a voice and that everyone

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should be heard. "When a client finally realizes that their voice matters," says executive director Sara Gagné-Holmes, "it's an amazing experience."

In 2010, MEJP worked with the Maine Women's Lobby, the University of New England School of Social Work and the University of Maine at Orono to conduct a survey of Maine households receiving Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF). The survey was partially supported by a grant from Maine Women's Fund. As of November 2010, there were, 14,755 Maine families (including 25,891 children) were receiving TANF. The majority of TANF families in Maine, the survey concluded, consist of single women raising children on their own. The average TANF family has 1.7 children and the median age of children in Maine TANF families is under two years old. Many TANF families struggle to get adequate health care, adequate food and adequate income. They also face barriers to employment including limited access to reliable transportation and childcare.

Through advocacy and legal services, MEJP works to improve the lives of these TANF families and other low-income individuals. Poverty can grow gradually or it can happen suddenly. Gagné-Holmes says, "The truth is we're all just one horrible tragedy away from being in our clients' shoes."

Like a team of super heroes, the nine employees of MEJP tirelessly battle injustices throughout the state. In the state house, they fight to create what's known as "impact legislation," like the anti-predatory lending bill, which passed in 2007. In the courtroom, they use class action suits to set precedents for State policy, as in the current suit to require

the State to support independent living for adults with cerebral palsy. In their efforts to ensure that everyone in Maine has access to the services they need, the MEJP staff is successful. The benefits to their clients are obvious, but the work is demanding. What keeps MEJP going?

"Our clients are truly inspirational," says Gagné-Holmes. "Parents believe in a better tomorrow for their kids, but struggle themselves. So many of them face so many obstacles, but still have a passion for improving the lives of others." Gagné-Holmes points to her colleague Public Policy Director Christine Hastedt as having "more energy than five people put together—she's unstoppable." Hastedt has been committed to social justice in Maine for close to forty years. "She lives and breathes everything that Maine Equal Justice stands for," says Gagné-Holmes. The organization has had little turnover since its inception in 1996. Gagné-Holmes came to MEJP from the Baldacci administration five years ago. Now, she says, "I really don't know what else I could do that would make such a difference."

That passion for improving the lives of others is something the MEJP staff shares with their clients. Gagné-Holmes describes one woman in her mid-40s, a client, who became a MEJP board member. She's now putting herself through graduate school while working to organize low-income individuals to make their voices heard. Together, the staff and clients of Maine Equal Justice Partners are speaking out against poverty and using their voices to help themselves and others Mainers.

How are you using your voice? Tell us.

