

**Janet T. Mills**  
Governor

**Sara Gagné-Holmes**  
Commissioner



**Maine Department of Health and Human Services**  
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October 3, 2024

Simonne Maline, Executive Director  
Consumer Council System of Maine  
219 Capitol St, Suite 7  
Augusta, ME 04330

Dear Ms. Maline,

Thank you for your issue statement regarding access to car repair services for people meeting the federal poverty guidelines. The primary issues pertained to many people struggling to maintain their vehicles when living on a lower income, often requiring them to make difficult choices between food, housing, basic needs, and owning or maintaining a vehicle due to the high cost of repairs and lack of resources to assist with such expenses. This in turn imposes additional hardships with medical and transportation needs, community connection, and strains on the public transportation system. The Department acknowledges the struggles many lower-income Mainers face throughout and how these can further impact their personal and interpersonal lives. Our response below was drafted in collaboration with the Office for Family Independence (OFI), and we strongly encourage the Council to engage in further discussions with OFI on other possible resources to better serve these constituents.

The Council's first and second recommendations encourage the Department to work with interested state community college automotive programs to prioritize Mainers meeting the federal poverty guidelines when in need of car repairs, and to similarly work with interested regional high school automotive programs to develop ways for individuals to gain greater access to car repairs. OFI has advised they will share the first recommendation with community college partners at every opportunity presented, and that their employment training programs serve adults who may be helped by adult education programs statewide, adding they will also share the second recommendation at every opportunity presented. Regarding high school automotive programs, it may be worthwhile to also engage the Department of Education, should they be able to coordinate any discussions or recommend relevant resources or contacts.

The Council's third recommendation is to encourage the Department to partner with United Way agencies to expand programs like the Don't Despair Car Repair Program. The Department may not be able to assist as extensively with this recommendation, but encourage the Council to engage with United Way, similar entities or organizations, and other Departments as appropriate to expand or duplicate this or a comparable service.

The Council's fourth recommendation is to provide information about the specific programs that fund car repairs for those are in the TANF program. In response, OFI has first referenced their program detail and rules<sup>1</sup> page on their website for additional information.

- Families receiving TANF benefits in Maine are referred to a TANF employment and training program called ASPIRE (Additional Support for People in Retraining and Employment). The ASPIRE program supports Mainers on TANF in obtaining and retaining employment through job skills development, a variety of occupational training opportunities, high school completion or equivalency (HiSet), certificate programs, English proficiency classes, and college or university programs. ASPIRE helps people achieve employment goals by offering a variety of support services, including transportation, with a maximum cap that is usually renewed annually. ASPIRE further offers supports with auto repairs, auto insurance, vehicle registrations, drivers' education classes, bus passes, fees associated with permit and licensing exams, and license renewal costs. Transportation supports may be used weekly to help participants travel to childcare, work, school, or a combination of those, and in returning home. Mileage is also offered to participants to aid them in getting to appointments related to ASPIRE activities.
- The Federal TANF Block Grant is also utilized for the Higher Opportunity for Pathways to Employment (HOPE) program which provides support to low-income parents or caretakers of minor children who are enrolled in postsecondary education or training programs. The HOPE program provides transportation supports for participants to engage in education and/or training activities, or similar activities. The program further assists<sup>2</sup> families with various transportation-related expenses depending on their need, including vehicle inspections, repairs, and registration; vehicle liability insurance; reimbursement for individual transportation, carpooling, public transportation, and contracted route drivers.

The Council's fifth recommendation is for the Department to support local libraries' efforts to loan basic tools needed to do DIY car repairs. Due to the nature of the Department's scope and authority, it may be more helpful or beneficial for the Council and partners to engage with local libraries and municipalities more directly to leverage existing programs and expand similar programs throughout other regions of the state. It may also be possible to leverage the discussions with community colleges and similar institutions to offer lower-cost services or training assistance to eligible individuals as part of their educational programming. There are other rental and loaner services available throughout the state<sup>3</sup>, however we acknowledge these may be less attainable for lower-income families or individuals.

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<sup>1</sup> [Policies/Rules | Department of Health and Human Services \(https://www.maine.gov/dhhs/ofi/about-us/rules\)](https://www.maine.gov/dhhs/ofi/about-us/rules)

<sup>2</sup> This assistance may take the form of direct payments to a vendor or reimbursement to the participant. The majority of transportation supports go toward mileage payments that allow participants to engage in education and employment activities, including the cost of travel to and from childcare services. There is a maximum cap for weekly mileage reimbursements, however, and most funding is through the Federal TANF Block Grant.

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.oreillyauto.com/store-services/rental-tools>; <https://www.oreillyauto.com/shop/b/tools---equipment/rental-tools/7a09f2cd0733>; [Equipment & Tool Rentals | Scarborough, ME | Sunbelt Rentals](#); [Digital Maine Library: Auto Repair](#); and [Do It Yourself | DoD MWR Libraries](#), for example.

The Council's sixth recommendation is Veterans' Groups Financial Assistance for Veterans and Service Members. We encourage the Council to engage with the Bureau of Veterans' Services more directly to expand or further leverage these and related services. The American Red Cross has partnered with military aid societies and other military service organizations for emergency financial assistance to service members and their families, including travel and other expenses, and this relationship could likewise further the Council's goals.

The Council's seventh recommendation is for the Department to develop a coalition to create a guide that includes statewide and regional-specific resources to help people struggling to navigate the maze of small organizations performing this work with maintenance of a document in support of this goal. The Department understands the Council's statement that they continue to hear 211 is difficult to navigate and therefore a guide is necessary. Though there may be some challenges and areas that could be improved with 211, the service is generally accepted as an invaluable resource that assists many Mainers with various needs. We encourage the Council to work with those involved in 211<sup>4</sup> more before the potential reallocation of resources and funding that would be necessary to recreate a similar service. It may also be possible to engage in further discussion regarding the potential for some form of guide or training available for the public on how to more effectively utilize the service. As time, technology, and individual or community experiences evolve overtime, so too can the services we often rely upon. In this regard, OFI has asked we help promote OFI 101<sup>5</sup>, a no-cost webinar for community partners and others who help people navigate OFI benefits.

The Council's expected outcome is expanding upon a myriad of opportunities for self-reliance and freedom, including personal safety and ownership of Mainers' lives, through ensuring safe and reliable vehicles and personal transportation. The Council advises that if individuals had their own reliable transportation, they would reduce the need for State funding of transportation and decrease the needs for mental health care by reducing the stress associated with irregular or unreliable transportation. The Department fully recognizes that such uncertainty and challenges can and do impact the health (mental and otherwise) of individuals, and that additional supports would be beneficial to our constituents. We respectfully remind the Council, however, that the Department is just one in the State of Maine, and similar to many other challenges Mainers face, collaboration among other departments, entities, municipalities, and other organizations is necessary to fully achieve some of these goals. We encourage you and other interested parties to engage OFI, the Bureau of Veterans' Services, United Way, universities, and others as appropriate and we will continue to support these efforts where we can to the extent possible.

Sincerely,

Signed by:  
  
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Sarah Squirrell  
Director  
Office of Behavioral Health  
Maine Department of Health and Human Services

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<sup>4</sup> United Way, The Opportunity Alliance, and DHHS.

<sup>5</sup> [OFI 101 \(https://www.maine.gov/dhhs/of/about-us/of-101\)](https://www.maine.gov/dhhs/of/about-us/of-101)