



# Maine Department of Health and Human Services (Maine DHHS) *TANF Disaster Response Highlights*

**HIGHLIGHT STATEMENT:** TANF Disaster Response Highlights provide a broad overview on how state and tribal TANF programs responded to the COVID-19 pandemic. Many programs' responses were informed from lessons they learned in responding to prior disasters. The information within these highlights has been shared to assist with the development of adaptable approaches and proactive disaster responses. Such preparations help ensure the uninterrupted continuation of services to the populations supported by TANF programs during crises like health pandemics and natural disasters.



## Program Overview

The Maine Department of Health and Human Services (Maine DHHS) houses a variety of support programs across the state including the Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) program.

The implementation of the Secure Transitions to Economic Prosperity (STEP) and Leveraging Investments so Families Can Thrive (LIFT) bills in 2019<sup>1</sup> caused sweeping changes across Maine DHHS, just as the COVID-19 pandemic was beginning.

While these initiatives were not started in response to COVID-19 or any other disaster, the broader issue of the benefits cliff, and a potential interruption in benefits became more pressing during the pandemic.

## COVID-19 Response

Due to the implementation of STEP and LIFT, Maine DHHS COVID response was largely intertwined with their implementation of the new regulations. There was a significant training effort that had to go along with this, as it was a totally new way of processing cases for staff.

Maine DHHS was able to connect participants with their Alternative Aid Assistance program which provides Non-Recurrent Short-Term Benefits (NRSTs) during an emergency. This benefit helps pay for one crisis-related expense and can provide up to 3 months of TANF benefits. This benefit was especially helpful throughout the pandemic to mitigate costs associated with vehicle maintenance, as many vehicles have been undriven and now are having issues. Alternative aid was also available to provide assistance with impending utility shut offs.

In direct response to the COVID-19 crisis, Maine DHHS adopted rule change that allowed individuals completing applications or annual reviews to complete them over the phone rather than in person. Feedback from participants has been that this increase in remote assistance has worked to remove stigma from applying to TANF, and it also alleviates burden of getting to and from an office for services. This has been particularly important given the geography of Maine and the distance many participants have to travel to reach an office.

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## Program Successes

Participants in Maine's TANF programs have indicated to program staff that the guarantee of 12 months of health coverage through MaineCare<sup>2</sup> and 3 months of consistent TANF benefits provided a source of security for them during uncertain times.

Maine DHHS contributes their success during the pandemic to starting off on clear footing across programs during the implementation of changes from the STEP and LIFT bills. The Department worked diligently to make sure staff across DHHS support programs were on the same page throughout the process and that the intent of the bill was interpreted the same by everyone. This was a critical success factor because Maine has an integrated system, administering TANF, SNAP, and Medicaid all out of the same computer system, and changes, especially technology changes, affect all service providers.

## Program Challenges

Implementing the rule changes under emergency rule was challenging for Maine DHHS staff. It was critical that staff really understand the policy changes to be able to implement the rules efficiently.

The increasing case load applied additional pressure to staff already taxed with learning and explaining new regulations. One of the largest barriers for eligibility specialists was articulating to participants that their food benefits and stipends had decreased due to the increase in their TANF benefits.

## Next Steps

Maine plans to continue to waive the requirement for face-to-face applications moving forward. For other programs looking to expand disaster response policies, Maine suggests adopting an alternative aid program, such as Non-Recurrent Short-Term Benefits (NRSTs).<sup>3</sup>



### INCREASE ACCESS BY REDUCING STIGMA:

Maine TANF recipients reported that the elimination of the face-to-face requirement for benefit application provided easier access and worked to eliminate the stigma associated with receiving benefits.

Based on the response of their program participants throughout their COVID response, Maine DHHS is planning to continue waiving this requirement.

*The Office of Family Assistance (OFA) thanks Alexandria Lauritzen, the Maine DHHS TANF Program Manager, for the information provided for this program summary.*

<sup>1</sup> [Governor Mills Signs Into Law Bipartisan Bills To Combat Poverty in Maine | Office of Governor Janet T. Mills](#)

<sup>2</sup> State of Maine Department of Health and Human Services website, COVID-19 webpage, [COVID-19 | Department of Health and Human Services \(maine.gov\)](#)

<sup>3</sup> Office of Family Assistance website, Non-Recurrent Short-Term Benefits webpage, [example: Non-Recurrent Short-Term Benefits | The Administration for Children and Families \(hhs.gov\)](#)