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Maine Women's Lobby Staff

Maine Women's Lobby

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THE BREAKFAST OF CHAMPIONS

The breakfast of Champions is an annual Maine Women's Lobby fund raising event, created to honor the anniversary of the Roe versus Wade decision. In recent years the Breakfast has been held in October in order to use this venue to air issues pertinent to upcoming elections.

This year we had the opportunity to hear three of the four U.S. Senate candidates state their views on the priority issues of the Lobby: violence against women; reproductive choice; economic security for women; and discrimination. Susan Collins, Joe Brennan and John Rensenbrink each spoke briefly and then responded to questions. The audience of 150 had far more questions for the candidates than there was time for response. The panel was skillfully moderated by Charlotte Renner of Maine Public Radio.

The breakfast, served at the Sheraton-Tara, was a success for the Lobby in part due to tables "bought" by different organizations and individuals. The following groups purchased full tables of tickets: Joe Brennan's campaign, Susan Collins' campaign, Maine AFL-CIO, Maine Chamber & Business Alliance, Maine Women's Labor Institute, Planned Parenthood of Northern Maine, and Women Unlimited. The Board thanks all who attended and made this event a success. We've already started to plan next year's breakfast.

MAINE WOMEN'S LOBBY

VOICES OF MAINE WOMEN: RECOMMENDATIONS FOR ECONOMIC SECURITY

In 1994, in response to the increasing number of "welfare reform" proposals, WDI commenced, along with 14 other organizations, the Women's Economic Security Project (WESP). WESP is a comprehensive study of welfare recipients of Maine.

WESP's research has yielded a wealth of information about the real face of "welfare" in Maine, showing what is true rather than what is believed to be true about Maine families living in poverty and receiving some form of public assistance. The data challenge readers to put aside common myths and stereotypes, and acknowledge that the real problem in need of solving is poverty, not the people living in poverty. As the studies make clear, a family's need for public assistance arises from imbalances and disparities in our economy, not from the character flaws of people "living on the edge." The solution is sound, creative, family-based economic policy based solely on the realities of economic life in Maine.

This research is now published in a report called Voices of Maine Women: Recommendations for Economic Security and is available for \$3.00 to cover postage and handling. For your copy, please send a check or money order to the Women's Development Institute, P.O. Box 85, Hallowell, Maine 04347.

D ATES OF INTEREST

November 16, Saturday: "Women's Words: Our Stories, Conversations, and Dialogues," Maine Women's Studies Conference, University of Maine, Bangor, FMI 581-6163

November 26, Tuesday: Bangor Women's Forum, sponsored by the Women's Resource Center, FMI 581-1508

YOUR ELECTRIC BILL IS ABOUT TO CHANGE

by Barbara R. Alexander, Consumer Affairs Consultant and member, Maine Women's Lobby Board



The electric bill. We get one every month and most of us pay it in full, but with some muttering. Many Maine families have to do more than mutter before they pay the bill. While Maine's median income households paid on average 4.7% of their annual income for energy in 1992, AFDC families had to allocate 22% of their annual income to keep the power and heat on. Elderly couples with Social Security Disability income

pay over 15% of their income for basic energy needs, leaving less than \$500 per month to pay for shelter, food, clothing, and medicine.

Maine, like most New England states is exploring the implications of allowing competition in the sale of electricity. Under the models being discussed in most states, the transmission of electricity and its distribution will remain monopolies subject to state or federal regulation. It is the generation and sale of electricity to retail buyers that has become the focal point of the

debate.

Large power users want to be able to negotiate their own contracts for electricity from the cheapest producer. There is no question that larger industrial consumers can and will benefit from the ability to bargain with any generator or marketer to get the deal, and small business customers and low use residential users may not be as fortunate.

Most commentators agree that many public benefits associated with the current form of regulation are at risk if we move to full blown retail competition: long-term energy planning to assure an adequate future supply of electricity; mandates for energy efficiency programs to reduce consumer costs and prevent unnecessary exploitation of fossil fuels and expensive future power plants; a state policy that emphasizes renewable sources of energy; customer protections and oversight of credit and collection procedures, deposits, marketing practices; low-income financial assistance programs and protections against harmful disconnections during cold winter months; and safety and reliability oversight.

Environmental organizations have correctly pointed out as well that an emphasis on short-term pricing without additional pollution control measures will stimulate the use of many old coal-burning power plants in the Midwest that will increase pollution, causing an increase in the drifting of pollutants to the northeast.

A coalition of consumer and energy groups has formed to make sure that any restructuring of the electric industry does not come at the cost of these important public benefits. Maine Electric Consumers, organized under the aegis of the Maine Public Advocate and including the Maine Equal Justice Project, Neighborhood Action Council, Maine Association of Interdependent Neighborhoods, Coalition for Sensible Energy, Conservation Law Foundation, among others, has published a Declaration of Principles to guide the Maine Public Utilities Commission and the legislature on electric

restructuring.

The Maine Public Utilities Commission is exploring the pros and cons of retail competition and its implication for future electricity prices. The Commission has issued a draft report and held two rounds of informal public comment sessions to gather feedback. Now the focus turns to the Legislature who will receive the Commission's final report in December, 1996. The Legislature will in turn decide whether retail competition is best for Maine and the conditions under which it will occur. These conditions are important to all residential customers, but vital for Maine's low-income families.

The Maine Women's Lobby will closely watch development in this area and help the Maine Electric Consumers Coalition ensure that the public benefits we have paid for over the last 80 years of regulation is not thrown out in the name of what could be the illusory benefits of competition.

For more information concerning the Maine PUC's draft report and to receive a copy of their final report, call or write:



Maine Public Utilities Commission
State House Station #18
Augusta, ME 04333
tel: 287-3661

The Commission's report and other useful material is available on the PUC's home page: <http://www.state.me.us/mpuc>

The Maine Electric Consumers Declaration of Principles can be obtained via:



Maine Public Advocate
State House Station #112
Augusta, ME 04333
tel: 287-2445
home page: <http://www.state.me.us/ag/pubadv.html>

WELFARE REFORM: SOME OF THE BASIC POINTS

by Kimberly C. Simmons

This year the Federal Government abdicated a 60 year responsibility to individuals and families living in poverty. Women will be disproportionately impacted by this law. The Maine Women's Lobby and Women's Development Institute remains committed to bringing the voices of the most effected population - poor women - to the forefront of public policy debates about welfare. This article briefly addresses some of the basic points of welfare reform. If you are interested in learning more about welfare reform or MWL/WDI research, please contact us at 622-0851.

Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Act of 1996 - what is it?

This law repeals basic federal entitlement programs, including AFDC, JOBS and Emergency Assistance. This means that our federal government no longer guarantees or necessarily provides minimum subsistence for individuals or families in economic crisis. This law will likely send millions of children into poverty. Similarly, women will be disproportionately impacted by the loss of federal entitlements for basic needs (in 1995 96% of adult AFDC recipients were women!). However, this change does give Maine some autonomy in the construction of entitlements. We hope that Maine will become a leader in forging equitable, compassionate, socially responsible programs. For this reason, welfare reform is one of the most important issues on the Maine Women's Lobby agenda.

What are Block Grants?

The Federal government provides states with grants equivalent to the money spent on AFDC in past years. While this amount should be sufficient during times of economic prosperity, no provisions were made for increasing the block grants if the numbers of people needing help increases. States have limited autonomy in administering the money, however the Federal government provides a number of stipulations. The Maine legislature may devise a budget which spends Federal money according to federal guidelines and uses state money to fill in gaps or expand services.

How Will ASPIRE Fit in?

Due to federal mandates requiring a large percentage of recipients to work at particular kinds of jobs, the ASPIRE program may be threatened in the future. We expect that individuals may be asked to choose quick training programs and take low wage jobs in order to meet work mandates.

Some Public Policy Questions:

How should "family" be defined?

What are appropriate income subsidies?

What income and assets ceilings are reasonable to qualify for assistance?

What will happen to families who reach their time limit but cannot find living wage jobs?

Does the state have an obligation to provide living wage jobs?

Should AFDC recipients and low income earners have access to education and job training programs?

To subsidized quality childcare? To public transportation?

To health care?

What'll happen to AFDC in Maine?

The Maine legislature voted to keep our current system in place in order to access the Block Grant, beginning November 1, 1996. However, future aspects of the distribution of AFDC dollars may change. For example, Maine must decide how we want to define families, what we think are appropriate income ceilings, whether or not we will continue to provide AFDC and Medicaid to legal immigrants and whether we will maintain the \$50.00 pass-through of child support to AFDC recipients.

What about Time Limits?

Adults (including teen parents) may only receive federally funded assistance (including non-cash assistance, like job training) for 60 months. Maine may exempt up to 20% of recipients from the time limit and may choose to use state dollars to assist families after their federal time expires. No provisions were made for families who have reached their time limit but cannot find living wage jobs.

How does the Maine Women's Lobby fit in?

Over the past years, the Women's Development Institute has researched women's economic status in the state of Maine. These projects include quantitative and qualitative research with AFDC recipients, and provide us with important data about the significant obstacles facing poor and working-class women. These obstacles include a lack of living wage jobs, affordable childcare and health care, transportation, and consistent child support. The state must address these obstacles in creating welfare reform. We believe that those most effected by legislation should have a large voice in creating it. We will persist with our commitment to include the voices of all women in the legislative process.

NEW FACES AT WDI/MWL

KIM SIMMONS

My name is Kim Simmons and I am a new Maine Women's Lobby and Women's Development Institute volunteer. This fall I moved to Portland from Minnesota, ostensibly to write my dissertation on feminist organizations (I'm a typically floundering doctoral student in sociology and women's studies). Working in the MWL/WDI office is much more fun and rewarding than working alone, and I'm grateful to have the opportunity to work with other women on behalf of women and girls. I look forward to meeting other MWL/WDI members.

Given the limited paid staff time, there is no way we would be able to accomplish the many projects that we undertake without the dedicated assistance of our volunteers and interns. We are delighted to have Kim and Charlean join us.

CHARLEAN WATTS

My name is Charlean Watts and I am the new student intern for the Maine Women's Lobby and Women's Development Institute. I am also a single mother of two boys, Stanley (7 1/2) and Derek (5); the Center for Campus Involvement and Customer Service Manager on the Portland USM campus; a second term Student Senator; Co-chair for the Coalition for Economic Justice; a Success By Age Six panel member which was put on by United Way and Channel 13; a soccer mom; and a full-time college student.

Being an intern for the Maine Women's Lobby and Women's Development Institute gives me the opportunity to repay some of the kindness and hard work that goes into making life a little easier for people who find themselves classified as low-income with no where to turn. This is an honor for me and I look forward to a wonderful, educational experience.

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"Optimizing the lives of Maine women and girls through public policy development and legislative action."