



## **Maine Advisory Committee to the U. S. Commission on Civil Rights Statement of Concern on the Use of General Assistance Funds**

### **Committee Urges Using General Assistance Funds for Internet Access for K-12 Students, Work Search, and Telehealth During the COVID-19 Pandemic**

The Maine Advisory Committee to the U.S. Commission on Civil Rights (the Committee) issued an [Advisory Memorandum](#) on digital equity and inclusion in Maine.<sup>1</sup> In a series of five briefings in 2020, the Committee examined key aspects of digital equity: whether Mainers have adequate access to affordable broadband, devices, and digital literacy training, and the intersection of digital equity and civil rights in the educational setting, issues brought into sharp focus during the COVID-19 pandemic. The Committee’s comprehensive report will be issued in the fall of 2021.

The Committee urges Governor Mills, the Maine Legislature, and all municipal overseers of their respective General Assistance programs to immediately allow digital and internet access as a basic necessity, as described in this Statement of Concern.

Maine General Assistance, governed by the Municipal General Assistance statute, defines “basic necessities” at 22 M.R.S.A §4301(1):

“Basic necessities” means food, potable water, clothing, shelter, fuel, electricity, nonelective medical services as recommended by a physician, nonprescription drugs, telephone where it is necessary for medical reasons and any other commodity or service determined essential by the overseer in accordance with the municipality's ordinance and this chapter.<sup>2</sup>

The Committee contends that pandemic-related internet connectivity and/or devices, such as hotspots and tablets, while not explicitly included in the definition of basic necessities for General Assistance recipients, should be covered in order for General Assistance recipients to comply with existing laws and be equally protected under the law. Access to internet connectivity and/or devices is critical for:

- 1) Families with K-12 students receiving General Assistance to complete school assignments while learning in remote settings during the pandemic, as equal access to education is required by law;<sup>3</sup>
- 2) General Assistance applicants to fulfill the work requirements (work search, application, and training program), during the pandemic;<sup>4</sup> and,
- 3) General Assistance recipients to participate in medical appointments by telehealth during the pandemic.

The Committee contends that the inclusion of these necessary items would have a profound impact on disadvantaged communities and would provide GA recipients access to basic services, enable them to comply with the law, and protect them from exposure during the pandemic.

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<sup>1</sup> See Maine Advisory Committee to U.S. Commission on Civil Rights, “[Advisory Memorandum on Digital Equity](#),” June 7, 2021, at Appendix A, <https://www.usccr.gov/files/2021/08-25-ME-SAC-Digital-Equity-Advisory-Memo.pdf>.

<sup>2</sup> ME. REV. STAT. ANN. tit. 22, § 4301(1) (2020).

<sup>3</sup> The Committee envisions authorization by individual teachers for K-12 students to be eligible for GA funds for this purpose.

<sup>4</sup> ME. REV. STAT. ANN. tit. 22, § 4316-A (2020).