Department of Health and Human Services
Maine People Living Safe, Healthy and Productive Lives
Paul R. LePage, Governor
Mary C. Mayhew, Commissioner

Department of Health and Human Services
Commissioner's Office
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January 14, 2016

Senator Eric L. Brakey, Chair
Representative Drew Gattine, Chair
Members of the Joint Standing Committee on Health and Human Services
#100 State House Station
Augusta, ME 04333-0100

Dear Senator Brakey, Representative Gattine, and Members of the Joint Standing Committee on Health and Human Services:

LD 525 "Resolve, To Direct the Department of Health and Human Services to Report on Efforts to Reach in Rural Areas Persons Who Are Elderly, Disabled or Mentally Ill" required the Department of Health and Human Services to report on its efforts to reach individuals in rural areas, particularly focusing on populations who may not have the necessary access or skillset to navigate electronic forms and other documentation through the Department's website and eligibility portals. LD 525 also required the department to hold at least one public meeting in Piscataquis County to ensure that the public and interested parties representing the elderly, disabled and mentally ill could inform the Department of the effectiveness of the Department's efforts and any shortcomings to reach individuals in rural areas.

Attached is the report as required by LD 525. If you have further questions or comments, please contact Nick Adolphsen at nick.adolphsen@maine.gov.

Sincerely,

Mary C. Mayhew
Commissioner

Attachment

MCM/klv

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Resolve 2015 Chapter 18: Resolve To Direct the Department of Health and Human Services to Report on Efforts to Reach in Rural Areas Persons Who Are Elderly, Disabled or Mentally Ill

Submitted to:
The Joint Standing Committee on Health and Human Services

January 14, 2016

Resolve 2015 Chapter 18: *"Resolve, To Direct the Department of Health and Human Services to Report on Efforts to Reach in Rural Areas Persons Who Are Elderly, Disabled or Mentally Ill"* required the Department of Health and Human Services to report on its efforts to reach individuals in rural areas, particularly focusing on populations who may not have the necessary access or skillset to navigate electronic forms and other documentation through the Department's website and eligibility portals. The resolve also required the department to hold at least one public meeting in Piscataquis County to ensure that the public and interested parties representing the elderly, disabled and mentally ill could inform the Department of the effectiveness of the Department's efforts and any shortcomings to reach individuals in rural areas.

The public meeting required by the law was held from on October 14, 2015 (6:00-8:00 p.m.) at the Penquis Higher Education Center in Dover-Foxcroft. More than 30 people attended to hear a brief presentation, ask questions and offer comments to Commissioner Mayhew.

There were many comments and questions from the group in attendance, which focused primarily on what the community believed to be a barrier to services created by the distance to DHHS offices. Since 2002, there has been no regional office in Piscataquis County. The attendees at the forum believed this has inappropriately limited access for vulnerable populations who do not have adequate transportation capability.

The Department is committed to ensuring vulnerable populations in need of State assistance have adequate access to necessary services. The comments received at the forum provided substantive input on how services are provided, and as a result the Department undertook a review of access in Piscataquis County.

There are many rural regions of the State, but only Piscataquis, Waldo, Lincoln and Sagadahoc counties do not have offices located within their county lines. In Piscataquis County, the Department of Health and Human Services maintained an office in Dover-Foxcroft until 2002. There is no data available from thirteen years ago to fully assess the level of walk-in traffic at the office. Prior closure, the Office for Family Independence (OFI) used the Dover Foxcroft Office only as an outreach point two days per month where eligibility staff traveled from the Bangor office to meet with the public regarding assistance benefits.

Eligibility data indicates out of Maine's population of 1.3 million people, 289,139, or 22%, receive state benefits. The chart below outlines the number of recipients per county, by total population and by the number of individuals in poverty.

County	Population	Individuals below Federal Poverty Level	Percentage below Federal Poverty Level	Individuals who Receive Assistance	Percentage Receiving Benefits
Androscoggin	107,632	16,790	15.6	29,294	27.2
Aroostook	70,789	11,539	16.3	20,214	28.5
Cumberland	283,840	32,358	11.4	45,475	16
Franklin	30,618	4,776	15.6	7,114	23.2
Hancock	54,566	7,639	14	9,626	17.6
Kennebec	121,710	16,309	13.4	29,504	24.2
Knox	39,606	4,277	10.8	8,339	21
Lincoln	34,143	3,995	11.7	6,456	19
Oxford	57,513	8,569	14.9	15,774	27.4
Penobscot	153,509	26,096	17	35,795	23.3
Piscataquis	17,026	3,150	18.5	4,838	28.4
Sagadahoc	35,093	3,895	11.1	6,244	17.8
Somerset	51,824	9,225	17.8	15,773	30
Waldo	38,870	6,375	16.4	9,850	25.3
Washington	32,481	6,334	19.5	10,750	33.1
York	199,041	18,908	9.5	34,180	17.2
Totals	1,328,261	180,235	13.5	289,139	21.8

Based on Census data, 18.5% of the residents in Piscataquis County lived below the federal poverty level during 2009-2013. This is compared to 13.6% for the State of Maine during the same time period. This includes all households without regard to age or disability. When these percentages are used on the respective populations, 3,150 residents of Piscataquis County and 180,235 residents of Maine are estimated to fall below the federal poverty level. As a percentage, 1.7% of Maine residents who live below the federal poverty level reside in Piscataquis County. A review of current recipient data shows 1.67% of Food Supplement households, 1.34% of TANF households and 1.7% of MaineCare recipients reside in Piscataquis County. The data indicates that from an eligibility standpoint, the residents of Piscataquis County access services at a level similar to every other region in the State.

Client inquiries to the office of constituent services, in the Commissioner's office, are tracked for each of the offices within DHHS. Of the 9,881 inquiries received by constituent services for the Office for Family Independence last year, 1.66% came from residents of Piscataquis County. The tracking system does not provide the granularity to determine how many inquiries were regarding lack of access to assistance programs, but the number of client inquiries is consistent with the proportion of individuals in poverty who reside in Piscataquis County.

OFI has recipient data for elderly and/or disabled individuals residing in Piscataquis County dating back to 2004. In November of 2004, 1,364 elderly and/or disabled residents in Piscataquis County were receiving Food Supplement, MaineCare, TANF or some combination of the three. By 2015, that number had increased to 2,141.

While no office exists in Piscataquis County, the increased utilization over the past decade indicates the multiple paths available for eligibility determinations and other Department inquiries are being utilized. Those paths include, but are not necessarily limited to, the following:

- The public can come to a regional office and meet with eligibility staff to apply, report changes, complete recertifications or obtain general information. This is probably the most difficult option for residents of rural regions like Piscataquis County.

- Applications, recertifications, changes or questions can be submitted by mail. Individuals who are elderly or disabled are not required to meet face-to-face with an eligibility worker. Any necessary follow up can be done by telephone or mail.

- OFI provides the capability for the public to submit applications, recertifications and changes through a webpage called My Maine Connection. This webpage is found on the Maine.gov website.

- Eligibility staff is available by phone each weekday to take applications, conduct interviews, record changes and answer program questions.

- A self-service kiosk has been available in the Penquis Cap office located in Dover-Foxcroft since June, 2013. The kiosk provides a direct connection to the My Maine Connection webpage. The kiosk has received minimal use.

- All programs allow the applicant to authorize another person to act on their behalf when conducting business with OFI. This authorization allows a family member, friend or caregiver to act on behalf of the applicant and enables them to use any of the access options identified above.

- Other community agencies are also available to provide services, support and connectivity in Piscataquis County, including the local Community Action Agency and the local Area Agency on Aging – both of which were created by Federal legislative action taken more than 40 years ago to strengthen the safety net for the low income and vulnerable individuals in our communities.

While the data does not point to a clear lack of access, anecdotal information from the Piscataquis County community seems to indicate some level of challenge for folks in this rural region of the State. In an effort to ensure adequate access, DHHS is open to piloting an outreach site in Piscataquis County at some regular interval to serve those who have difficulty with other means of interacting with the office regarding assistance. In order to do so, the Department will need the commitment of community resources to house a staff person. The pilot will be assessed by the Office for Family Independence after one year to determine the value of the outreach site to the community and to the operations of DHHS.

Questions or comments, can be sent to Nick Adolphsen at nick.adolphsen@maine.gov.