

Covid-19 Q&A with Maine Equal Justice
March 19th, 2020

The following are notes from a conference call between Maine Equal Justice staff and impacted individuals in the community. This information focuses on resources in response to the COVID-19 Pandemic.

Our Legal Services Team can help with:

- DHHS programs. DHHS benefits.
 - o TANF
 - o SNAP
 - o Child Care Subsidy
 - o MaineCare
 - o Etc.
- We may be able to provide help with:
 - o Accessing supports that you need;
 - o Questions about eligibility with government programs

Changes to Know About:

- TANF/ASPIRE:
 - o Appointments/etc. can be done over the phone:
 - You can do yearly review over the phone and don't have to go in person;
 - You can apply for TANF over the phone instead of going in person
 - Fedcap appointments
 - Work participation for Fedcap can be done at home
 - o **§ If Fedcap is asking you to do something that doesn't make sense, please contact MEJ.**
 - o Fedcap will not be sanctioning anyone for not doing something that requires you to do something in the public and with other people around.
 - **If you are told something different from your Fedcap worker, or if they're asking you to do something that you don't think is safe, call MEJ.**
 - **Fedcap may suggest things you don't think you should do. Ask clarifying questions. "Are you just suggesting this, or are you saying I have to do this?"**
 - o Even if you're not sure if you qualify for a benefit, we recommend applying now, so you can have an earlier start date and therefore eventually get some more benefits in the end if you do end up qualifying.

- o Apply through My Maine Connection. The Department's online portal. They will email you for more info.

Census

- The gov has changed the timeline. They've delayed door to door Census taking.
- Please help us spread the word. We were already worried that people would be undercounted.
- You can do it online right now. Once you do it, they take you off the list.
Great to do it now!
 - o The website is in the chat and Ambureen will share it after the call.

QUESTIONS

Utilities

- PUC has directed all utilities to not engage in disconnection

General Assistance

- Everyone can apply. You cannot be turned down from applying.
- Homelessness counts as an emergency. Automatically eligible for Emergency GA.
- Everything should be working remotely and no one should feel like they should have to walk into an office to apply.
- Offices should be open at reasonable hours
- Should be able to apply 24/7. Notice should be posted on how to do that.
- If there is a citizen in the household, then they can reach out to Pine Tree Legal for help with GA.
- You should get a written decision within 24 hours.
- If you disagree, you can appeal the decision within 5 days and can ask for a fair hearing.
- Fair hearing should be made available over the phone.
- Issue we've been hearing about: Immigrants are being asked to provide an Alien number; also being asked to provide a letter from an immigration attorney or from ILAP. Neither of these should actually be required. Let us MEJ know if you hear about this happening or if this happens to you.

Evictions

- Courts are closed right now to most types of cases, and that's until May 1st. In order for a landlord to evict, they have to file a motion with the court to get permission to do this. They must go through court process.

- If landlord threatens tenants, they should call law enforcement.
- Even if you don't have a lease agreement, the landlord still has to get permission from the court to evict you.
- You have to get two things before a landlord can evict:
 - o A notice to quit and
 - o A Summons from a sheriff
- If Pine Tree isn't available, then you can call MEJ
- Try not to fall behind on your rent. If you fall behind, you may try GA or other benefit programs for help paying the rent. Once you fall behind, it is much easier for the landlord to evict.
- It's good to have a copy of some sort of proof that you're a tenant. Like a copy of your lease or some proof that you pay rent. If you reach out to law enforcement, then it is good to have this paperwork on hand.

Unemployment Insurance

- You can watch a recording of a meeting we held this morning with Dept. of Labor Commissioner Laura Fortman about new changes to Unemployment Insurance.
- Unemployment Insurance is a benefits program meant to help people who have lost their jobs.
- Many more people are eligible than who think they are. If you have lost your job, then we recommend you apply.
- Recent changes:
 - o People who are temporarily out of work because of COVID-19 should apply. They won't have to do a work-search. As long as their intent is to go back to their previous employer.
 - o Now you don't have to wait a week to start getting benefits.
 - o If people can apply online, that is the quickest way for people. Long waits on the phone. MEJ's fact sheet on this provides instructions on where to go to apply.
 - o If you quit your job because you don't feel like you can be safe due to COVID-19, then there is a good chance that you will qualify for UI even though you quit your job. This will be decided on a case-by-case basis.
 - o If you quit your job to care for your kids right now, you should be able to get UI.
 - o If your wages dropped significantly due to COVID-19, then you may be able to get partial benefits
 - o Immigrants: if you have a work permit, or if you have worked using a work permit, then you may be eligible.
 - o If your employer lays you off for COVID related reasons, the employer's UI-related tax rate will not be affected if you get UI.

- There is a maximum limit of 26 weeks for UI. But the Federal or State Governments can extend that. Some of the conversations in Congress right now are talking about extending this.
- Right now, under current Maine law, UI does not cover people who are self-employed. However, Congress is considering making a change to cover more self-employed and contract workers.
- Employers should NOT be requiring you to use your accrued paid time off if you have to miss work for COVID-related reasons. You should still be eligible for UI even if you have unused paid time off. But if you do use your PTO, it will count against your UI since it is considered earnings.

Southern Maine Worker Center Hotline

- Workers can call about issues that they're having. Including unemployment insurance issues.
- They will be helping people apply for UI.

Food and Food Security

- Good Shepherd's website has good information about soup kitchens and soup kitchen closings
- MEJ's COVID-19 resources page has a section on food security
- In the bill that just passed through Congress, there is a provision to temporarily suspend the 3-month time limit on SNAP. This isn't in effect yet, but should be soon.
- There are other potential changes happening nationally and we'll share those as they happen.

Mutual Aid

- Idea that we should take care of each other
- Examples of mutual aid people have seen:
 - o Local school provided packed lunches and dinners
 - o Maine Coronavirus Community Assistance - Facebook group
 - o Presente Maine - Facebook group

Q about Trump's plan to provide checks to people:

- Congress is thinking of sending cash payments out of \$1,000 to all Americans.
- There are conversations going on of providing immediate cash payments to people with low income on top of that.
- None of that has happened yet, but it's being discussed as part of the next round of stimulus help from Congress.

Q when somebody changed employers...didn't have income the year before with their last employer, but DID have income with another employer. What can you do when they don't let you enter a '0' as your income last year with your last employer?

- You have to have earned at least \$5100 over the past year. If you have this, then it doesn't matter which employer it was with. The website is problematic with regard to this. To correct this, you can either try calling the Dept. of Labor and apply that way. If you can't get through, you can still apply online, and wait for someone from DOL to contact you.
- There's a lag with the online application. You should give it 24 hours to see if they've received your application.