



Speaking Up For Us
Monique Stairs, Executive Director
(207) 956-1004 Ext 5
mstairs@sufumaine.org

SPEAKING UP FOR US MEMBERS ADVOCATE FOR FUNDING OF LD 1666, ALLOWING MAINER'S WITH DISABILITIES TO MARRY WITHOUT LOSING BENEFITS

March 12, 2024

For Immediate Release

Speaking Up For Us (SUFU), Maine's Self-Advocacy Network, is advocating for LD 1666, a bill that would increase Maine's contribution of SSI and allow Mainer's with disabilities to get married without losing a portion of their Social Security Income (SSI) benefits, to be funded in the Supplemental Budget. SSI provides a basic level income for people who live with disabilities to help meet their needs for food, clothing and shelter. Currently, if two people who both receive SSI benefits want to get married, there is a reduction in their benefits. This is referred to as the "Marriage Penalty" by self-advocates.

Last year the Health and Human Services Committee voted unanimously to pass LD 1666 but due to the funding increase attached to the bill it fell short of being enacted. Self-advocates hope for the passage in this year's supplemental budget as it would increase the amount Maine contributes to monthly SSI benefits from \$10 per individual to \$65 per individual and the amount for married couples from \$15 to \$130. The Maine contribution has not been increased in many years.

The important impact of this bill is that more Mainer's living with disabilities would be able to exercise their rights to get married without fear of losing the benefits they rely on. "I would say that it is unfair that people who get married with a disability have to lose their income. It is unfair to have no income and be dependent on someone else. It makes me feel lower than low as a person. It is very unfair." States Stephanie Pelletier, a SUFU Self-Advocates who has been directly impacted by the Marriage Penalty when she got married in August 2020.

"For people who live with disabilities, the 'marriage penalty' is a hot topic because it creates unfair choices between love, personal values and the potential loss of income that provides the basic necessities like food, clothing and shelter," says Monique Stairs, Executive Director of SUFU. "Passing LD 1666 would be a step in the right direction to remedy this injustice and allow for more freedom and equality for people who live with disabilities."

Self-advocates from across Maine have shared their personal stories about how the current policy has impacted them and prevented them from marrying the person they love.

"This bill is important to me because myself and other people are struggling with the cost of living, and I know people who lost part of their benefits after they have gotten married." Nicole (Jozie) Easler, Presque Isle

"It adds a little bit of income and gives an update according to the current standard. It will help me deal with the rising cost of daily expenses and a bit of extra income will ease the burden. If I chose to get married in the future, I will know that I or my spouse will not lose our entire income." Regina Bowie Presque Isle



“There is no reason why the income should be taken from people who get married. When you get married you still have bills to pay. People should not lose their money when they get married.” Jennifer Francis, Beals

“I ask you to see this from the point of view of someone who relies on this income. SSI helps people instead of hurts people with disabilities. I think we should eliminate the marriage penalty so people can get married just like everyone else. They need to be able to keep all their benefits so they can have a stable place to live and be in their community.” Jon McGovern, Bangor

“We even contacted a lawyer and he told us we should just get a divorce and live together. It was a slap in the face. Why do people with disabilities have to hide and keep their love secret from the social security administration so they can keep their benefits? If we want to get married we should be able to, just like anyone else.” Kile Pelletier, Fort Kent

Their testimony underscores why this bill is so important in expanding the rights and empowerment for people living with disabilities.

While LD 1666 is specific to Maine’s contribution to SSI, much work is still needed to make changes on a federal level. A delegate of Self-Advocates from Maine will be traveling to the Disability Policy Seminar in Washington D.C. in April to advocate for **S. 4102 SSI Savings Penalty Elimination Act** and **HR 7055 Eliminating the Marriage Penalty in SSI Act**.

SUFU is urging people to contact their legislators and let them know that funding LD 1666 is a priority issue to bring equality and justice to people living with disabilities in Maine.

About Speaking Up For Us

Speaking Up For Us (SUFU) is Maine’s self-advocacy organization run by and for people living with Intellectual and Developmental Disabilities. SUFU’s mission is to empower people living with developmental disabilities to speak up and take action in ways that improve their lives. We do this by promoting education, advocacy, and leadership skills to self-advocates because it is important for people to be in control of their own lives.

Additional Materials

[National Council on Disability | 2023 Progress Report: Toward Economic Security: The Impact of Income and Asset Limits on People with Disabilities \(ncd.gov\)](#)

[Research: Treatment of Married Couples in the SSI Program \(ssa.gov\)](#)

[getDocument.aspx \(maine.gov\)](#)

[H.R.7055 - 118th Congress \(2023-2024\): EMPISA Act | Congress.gov | Library of Congress](#)

[Text - S.4102 - 117th Congress \(2021-2022\): SSI Savings Penalty Elimination Act | Congress.gov | Library of Congress](#)

