



# DIOCESE OF MAINE

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February 3, 2021

Senator Baldacci, Representative Matlack, and Members of the State and Local Government Committee, my name is Eleanor Prior. I serve as the Canon Pastor of the Cathedral Church of St. Luke in Portland. I am offering testimony in **support** of LD 2 – An Act to Require the Inclusion of Racial Impact Statements in the Legislative Process on behalf of the **Episcopal Diocese of Maine Racial Justice Council**.

In the Christian scriptures Jesus repeatedly calls on all to treat their neighbors as themselves. In the gospel of Matthew, he more specifically describes the kingdom of heaven as a place where, “for I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was naked and you gave me clothing, I was sick and you took care of me, I was in prison and you visited me.”

Knowing that people of color consistently are statistically overrepresented as those living below the poverty level, as those targeted for police intervention, and prison sentences, and even for being more vulnerable to Covid-19, the need for a racial impact statement to address these inequalities is essential.

In the Christian tradition, the kingdom of heaven is something that occurs on earth, when all the people act morally to bring about care and equality for all. It is not a passive position. To act justly is to care for those who are the most vulnerable.

### **There are significant disparities based on race, ethnicity, and tribal status in Maine.**

Data shows many of our systems work better for white Mainers than for racial and ethnic minorities or members of tribal nations. This is true in education, health care, housing, employment, income, wealth, interaction with the criminal justice system, and more.

The disparities we see in different areas are the result of a complex set of factors, including unfair laws, policies, and practices established in the past and many of which are still with us or are still hurting Maine families today. The causes are different depending on the particular disparity we're considering, whether it be in poverty rates, incarceration rates, or levels of income and wealth. Racial impact statements offer a tangible way for policymakers to consider these factors in a constructive way.

## **Racial disparities harm all of us.**

To build a thriving economy, every Mainer — regardless of race or heritage — must be able to participate and achieve their full potential. When some Mainers are held back or held down because of their race, ethnicity, or tribal status, it hurts all of us.

## **Racial impact statements will lead to better lawmaking.**

Policies often have unintended consequences that contribute to racial injustice. It would be best to understand and address them before bills become laws. This is the same idea behind fiscal and environmental impact statements, which are widely viewed as responsible tools of government.

They allow lawmakers to be more intentional about the effects of the laws they enact. Racial impact statements present objective factors that lead to better-informed decision-making.

It is easier to modify legislation than it is to reverse a law once it is enacted. Evaluating potential disparities prior to a bill being enacted and implemented will create a proactive opportunity to advance racial equity rather than waiting to try to reverse effects.

## **This is a significant step toward advancing racial justice in Maine**

While racial impact statements will not end racism, this is an action that legislators can take now that will have a long-lasting impact. It took centuries to create today's inequities, and it will take a long time to eliminate them. But we have to start now if we are committed to making sure our state government reflects our shared values of fairness and justice.

Theologian Howard Thurman was clear about “the striking similarity between the social position of Jesus in Palestine and that of the vast majority of American Negroes is obvious to anyone who tarries long over the facts.” (Jesus and the Disinherited, p. ix) That the central figure of Christianity was indeed disenfranchised, vulnerable, speaks to the inherent human dignity in each and every human being, speaks to the moral imperative of equal opportunity for all.

## **I leave you with the wise words from Proverbs 31:8-9**

Speak out for those who cannot speak, for the rights of all the destitute. Speak out, judge righteously, defend the rights of the poor and the needy.

Thank you for your service to the people of Maine.

The Rev. Eleanor Prior

John Hennessy  
Episcopal Diocese of Maine  
LD2

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