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**Sara Gideon Donates \$3.5 Million Dollars to Establish the Build HOPE Project
at Maine Equal Justice**

Gift will directly support parents completing post-secondary degrees, credentials

AUGUSTA - Sara Gideon, former Speaker of the House and candidate for US Senate, announced a \$3.5 million contribution of leftover campaign funds to establish the new Build HOPE Project at Maine Equal Justice (MEJ). Maine Equal Justice is a nonprofit, civil legal aid and economic justice organization working to increase economic security, opportunity, and equity for people in Maine. The Build HOPE Project will work to create economic opportunity for parents today and their children tomorrow, creating pathways out of poverty to help working parents complete their post-secondary degrees or credential program.

“During my time in the Maine Legislature, I worked closely with Maine Equal Justice, enacting real reforms to help move people out of poverty and into the workforce. Creating these opportunities for families means more Maine kids reach their full potential,” said Gideon. “This gift will provide immediate and significant support to working parents earning their degree, to their children -- and ultimately to the entire state -- by increasing the numbers of higher skilled workers badly needed by Maine’s employers and our economy.

“The oversight and stewardship of the remainder of the funds from my campaign has been, and will remain, an ongoing responsibility. The Build HOPE project is the result of thoughtful

planning nearly a year in the making and as a result will fill a genuine void in Maine for both working families and our workforce,” said Gideon.

In 2018, Gideon sponsored [legislation](#) that established the Higher Opportunity Pathways to Employment (HOPE) program, which is administered by the Department of Health and Human Services. HOPE is currently available to families with incomes at or below 185% of the federal poverty level pursuing a post-secondary degree or credential that has at least an average job outlook as identified by the Department of Labor. This program is an important tool in efforts to increase Maine’s health care workforce, as two primary areas of focus for HOPE participants are in the behavioral health field and nursing. Currently, the HOPE program is serving 396 parents, with an additional 300 slots opening due to an increase recently approved by the Maine Legislature.

While HOPE provides critical support that can enable parents and caregivers to go back to school and succeed, some students still struggle to make ends meet over the course of their program. A recent survey conducted by the Department of Health and Human Services supported the need for this emergency fund finding that:

- Over 60% of students are unable to pay car-related costs.
- Over 58% don’t have the funds needed for school supplies.
- Over 53% cannot afford internet access needed to participate in their schooling.
- Over 44% cannot afford utility costs.

Eighty-three percent of HOPE students have difficulty making ends meet at the end of each month, and 59% of them are just \$100-\$300 short of what they need to make ends meet on their family budget.

The Build HOPE Fund, administered by Maine Equal Justice, will help to address these needs when students require financial assistance during the course of their participation in HOPE. The Build HOPE Fund will also be available to low-income parents with children participating in the Parents as Scholars program, which is similar to HOPE and available to lower income families.

“The HOPE Program provides critical support to low-income parents working their way through school. Help with child care, transportation, and books and supplies can make the difference when it comes to success completing a degree,” said Robyn Merrill, executive director at Maine Equal Justice. “But we also know there are gaps in support in the current program that can work to derail parents’ successful completion. The Build HOPE Fund will be there when students face an emergency car repair or a leaking pipe. It will be there when students cannot afford the internet they need for school or their groceries for the month.”

“The HOPE Program played a significant part in easing some of the stressors while I was completing my bachelor’s degree,” said Hilary Moore, a successful HOPE graduate. “This allowed me to graduate in the top of my class, while earning two university awards and still being able to focus on my children. From my experience with the HOPE Program, I have realized that perseverance and guidance can get you anywhere in life. I also experienced some gaps in support while in HOPE that this new Build HOPE Fund could help address. I cannot wait to see what the future holds for the HOPE Program and its participants.”

Additionally, the Build HOPE project will provide policymakers with reliable evidence that can inform long-term, systemic policy improvements to increase economic opportunities for parents and their children. Data from HOPE participants who access the Fund will be collected by Maine Equal Justice for analysis.

“This research will help ensure that programs like HOPE and Parents as Scholars are as effective as they can be in helping parents succeed in their educational and training pursuits,” said Luisa Deprez, professor emerita of Sociology and Women & Gender Studies, who is assisting with the underlying research. “While the Build HOPE Project will work to ease hardship and increase opportunity for families today, it will also assist in building a deeper collective understanding of how to improve programs into the future so as to lift families with children out of poverty and strengthen Maine’s workforce.”

The project will begin in January of 2022. For more information about HOPE, Parents as Scholars, or the Build HOPE Project, visit www.maineequaljustice.org

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