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Testimony of Tom Fritzsche on behalf of Pine Tree Legal Assistance to the Judiciary Committee In Support of LD 564, An Act to Improve Access to Civil Legal Services

March 21, 2023

Good afternoon, Senator Carney, Representative Moonen, and esteemed members of the Judiciary Committee.

My name is Tom Fritzsche, and I am the Executive Director of Pine Tree Legal Assistance. You have heard from members of our Board of Directors about the value to Mainers of the legal services that Pine Tree Legal Assistance provides across the state.

I will not belabor the points that they and other witnesses have made, but I will say a little about what LD 564 would mean for Pine Tree's ability to serve Mainers in need.

Pine Tree has six offices: Presque Isle, Machias, Bangor, Augusta, Lewiston and Portland. Our staff handle cases in all 16 counties, in all 29 district courts, and in the courts of the Passamaquoddy Tribe and Penobscot Nation. We are Maine's largest non-profit provider of legal services, and for many Mainers needing legal help for housing stability, protection from abuse or harassment, consumer rights, and many other basic needs, Pine Tree is their first and last resort.

In 2022, Pine Tree Legal Assistance worked on 7,582 cases, 12% more than the previous year. Pine Tree served 18,342 people through individual cases, including 6,883 children. Pine Tree served 11,627 people through community education activities including consultations, meetings, presentations, and trainings.

Our statewide telephone intake system received a total of 10,328 intake calls from people seeking representation – an increase of 180% compared to 2019.

During our telephonic intake hours, an experienced and skilled team of paralegals, with attorney supervision, fields dozens of calls. We listen to learn about the callers' concerns and needs. After a detailed intake conversation, callers get an answer to know if Pine Tree can represent them or provide individualized legal advice, and if not, they get a referral or other information. I sometimes help answer the phone and have observed the same thing that our paralegals have always noted: a difficult percentage of callers cry at some point during their calls. Some people are crying because they have to be in court in a few days and they do not know what is going to happen to them and their families. Some people cry tears of relief when we say we can take their case and an attorney from the nearest regional office will contact them the next day.

Some people cry when we give the unfortunate news that we cannot help them. That can happen for a variety of reasons, including because they have a legal issue we cannot address. But sometimes, it happens because our staff is fully booked and cannot take on another case. In 32% of the 7,582 cases we handled during 2022, we had to provide a more limited degree of legal service than the client wanted. And this does not include the callers whose cases we had to decline entirely.

During intake hours, we can see how long each person calling us has been on hold, and sometimes the wait time exceeds 40 minutes. When someone is only calling us in the first place because they are afraid or uncertain, waiting on hold elevates their stress level. One person whose call I recently answered, after he had been waiting about 35 minutes, said, before even telling me about his legal problem, “thank God you are a real person”.

We would like to add more staff to support our telephone intake system to answer calls to reduce wait times and ensure we provide access to as many people as try to call us. We would like to add staffing to increase the capacity in each of our units and offices to help more Mainers.

LD 564 would enable Pine Tree to do serve more Mainers. In total, the legal service providers, including Pine Tree, estimate that LD 564 would enable us all together to help over 10,000 additional Maine households each year, beyond the many of your constituents whom we already serve.

Thank you for your time and attention. I am happy to answer any questions.