

PINE TREE LEGAL ASSISTANCE

Legal Assistance 0553

	<u>Actual</u>	<u>Current</u>	<u>Budgeted</u>	<u>Budgeted</u>
GENERAL FUND	2019-20	2020- 21	2021-22	2022- 23
All Other	<u>\$500,000</u>	<u>\$500,000</u>	<u>\$500,000</u>	<u>\$500,000</u>
GENERAL FUND TOTAL	\$500,000	\$500,000	\$500,000	\$500,000

Pine Tree Legal Assistance [PTLA] has received an appropriation from the General Fund since 1983 to support the provision of legal assistance to low-income Maine residents around the State. LD 211 proposes flat funding at \$500,000/year, continuing an annual appropriation level set by Governor LePage, which has been in effect since 2015.

PTLA is Maine's oldest and largest provider of free legal services to low-income Maine residents with serious civil legal problems. It handles cases that are not eligible for court-appointed counsel through the Maine Commission on Indigent Legal Services. Roughly 50% of all cases involve housing issues (including landlord/tenant matters and foreclosure proceedings); other important priorities include protection from domestic violence and sexual assault, financial stability, access to education, and enforcement of state and federal laws affecting agricultural workers, Native Americans, and veterans. PTLA staff and volunteers screen requests and then provide legal help through a network of local field offices (Portland, Lewiston, Augusta, Bangor, Machias and Presque Isle.)

Many of Pine Tree's clients are the working poor: people who work 40 hours a week in minimum wage jobs and support a spouse and children. Others are single parents trying to provide a stable family life for their children. Some are adults with significant disabilities who are struggling to live independently. As a result of increased outreach and shifting resources around the State, four particularly vulnerable client populations need legal services from PTLA:

- Client households that include someone with a disability: in 2020, they represented more than a third of all clients served.
- Victims of domestic violence, sexual assault, or trafficking: in 2020, they represented 18% of all cases handled.
- Veteran households and low-income military families: in 2020, they represented more than 11% of all clients served.
- Low-income children and youth: in 2020, direct legal services benefitted more than 6,100 children and youth.

The State appropriation has become increasingly important as other general funding sources have steadily declined. In calendar year 2021, 78% of the PTLA budget comes from short-term grants and contracts. Most of these funders do not cover the full costs of legal assistance, making general funds essential to meet those commitments. General funding also allows staff to handle specific legal needs that are not prioritized by other funders, such as legal services for Maine veterans.

State funding also provides a source of matching funds for specific projects that require a match from non-federal general funds. For instance, PTLA operates Maine's only low-income taxpayer clinic [LITC] providing free help to residents facing IRS disputes that can involve thousands of

dollars. The grant requires a ‘dollar for dollar’ match from non-federal funds and a portion of our State appropriation helps underwrite this tax work each year.

Every dollar of State funding is used carefully by Pine Tree's dedicated staff in providing legal assistance to as many individuals as possible, given limited resources. Despite the challenges of the pandemic in 2020:

- PTLA handled more than 6,300 cases affecting almost 16,000 low-income Mainers.
- PTLA websites (including www.ptla.org, www.kidslegal.org and www.statesidelegal.org) recorded more than 3 million page views and drew more than 1.6 million unique visitors.
- Local PTLA trainings, consultations and presentations on important legal rights and benefits reached more than 3,800 individuals.

Some State funding is also used to respond to requests from legislators or Administration officials regarding matters within Pine Tree staff expertise, and to serve on various advisory commissions at the request of local or state officials. Because of federal funding restrictions, these requests cannot be handled without funding from the State.

Daniel Emery
Pine Tree Legal Assistance

Testimony of Daniel W. Emery Before the Joint Standing Committee on Appropriations and Financial Affairs and the Joint Standing Committee on the Judiciary on March 1, 2021

Senator Breen, Representative Pierce and members of the Appropriations Committee, Senator Carney, Representative Harnett, and members of the Judiciary Committee,

Thank you for the opportunity to address the Joint Committee in support of the Governor's proposed funding for Pine Tree Legal Assistance under LD 221 for the Biennial Budget. A Justification Statement about this funding has also been included with a copy of my remarks.

My name is Dan Emery; I am a lawyer in Yarmouth and handle Social Security Disability cases, and I am Chair of the Pine Tree Board. Nan Heald, the Executive Director of Pine Tree Legal Assistance, is also available to answer your questions.

I am honored to represent Pine Tree. Pine Tree is an essential part of the civil justice system in Maine, with approximately 40 lawyers and offices in Portland, Lewiston, Augusta, Bangor, Machias and Presque Isle. The proposed budget would continue to appropriate \$500,000/year to Pine Tree Legal Assistance in support of legal services to low-income residents of Maine with noncriminal legal problems. Pine Tree first began receiving this level of funding in the FY 2015 budget and it has been held flat since that time.

Your investment of taxpayers' dollars in our agency is a responsibility that we have taken very seriously for the last 37 years and will continue to do so. These funds are an investment by the State in the ability of low-income Mainers to access justice and retain or achieve stability. Pine Tree has voluntarily adopted strong fiscal policies to provide accountability for all funding it receives. Every dollar of funding is tracked and allocated in detail. Our management and administrative expenses are kept low to make sure that services to clients come first. Pine Tree is one of the less than 1% of Maine nonprofits that have received the highest possible Platinum rating from GuideStar.

Although Pine Tree can serve less than 20% of those who seek our assistance, our staff are dedicated to doing the best possible work with the widest possible reach. The agency is effective, efficient, and strong. Your investment in our work helps us leverage additional federal dollars and private foundation funds. Without that support, our legal staff could not help low-income Mainers in every county resolve civil legal problems that threaten safety, economic stability, or housing. We are a 'first responder' for legal problems facing client groups including veterans, homeless youth, and victims of domestic violence or sexual assault.

The State Appropriation supports all of Pine Tree's services (including its nationally recognized websites supporting both the Maine people generally as well as military and veteran families with legal needs). Pine Tree has adapted its services during the pandemic to keep its clients and staff safe, while continuing to prioritize the legal needs of Maine families. In 2020, Pine Tree handled more than 6,300 cases around the State, including problems with domestic violence, public benefits, IRS stimulus checks, landlord/tenant matters, and various consumer problems. Of cases receiving full representation, 95% were resolved in favor of the PTLA client.

The people served by Pine Tree are among the most vulnerable in our State:

- 91% had incomes below 200% of the federal poverty guidelines.
- One in three client households included someone with a disability.
- One in five was a single head of household with children.
- One in six was age 60 or older.
- One in seven was Black, Indigenous or a person of color.
- One in eleven was a veteran.

Pine Tree has also expanded the self-help resources on our three program websites: www.ptla.org, www.kidslegal.org and our national website for veterans and military households, www.statesidelegal.org. In 2020, those sites were visited by almost 1.7 million individuals.

Securing access to justice for Maine individuals and families has a positive impact

across many sectors of society — the economy, health, safety, and general well-being of our residents. We are truly making a difference in people's lives by ensuring that they are treated fairly within our legal system. I see firsthand just how effective and committed Pine Tree's staff is, and I consider it an honor so serve on the Board.

Both Nan and I are available to answer your questions now; Nan will also be present for the work session at which this appropriation will be discussed.

We thank you for your consideration of Pine Tree's important work, and we also thank you for all your work on behalf of the citizens of Maine