



PINE TREE LEGAL ASSISTANCE, INC.

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**Testimony of Tom Fritzsche on behalf of Pine Tree Legal Assistance
to the Judiciary Committee and the Appropriations and Financial Affairs Committee
In Support of Maine state appropriations for Pine Tree Legal Assistance's legal services to
low-income Mainers, including the medical-legal partnership for veterans**

February 27, 2023

Good afternoon, Senators Rotundo and Carney, Representatives Sachs and Moonen, and esteemed members of the Appropriations and Financial Affairs Committee and esteemed members of the Judiciary Committee.

My name is Tom Fritzsche, and I am the Executive Director of Pine Tree Legal Assistance. Many of you may have known Nan Heald, who was Pine Tree's director for 32 years and sadly passed away of cancer a little over one year ago.

It's a tremendous challenge to carry on Nan's work, but it is an honor to try.

I am here to testify in support of Maine's appropriation that supports Pine Tree Legal Assistance's civil legal aid to low-income Mainers. I'll say a little about Pine Tree's work in general and then a little about the state's appropriation and how Pine Tree uses it to serve Mainers in need.

Pine Tree opened its doors in the summer of 1967 and has been overwhelmed with people in need of our services ever since.

Currently, Pine Tree has 78 full-time staff, and more than 100 volunteers contribute their time and expertise each year.

We have six offices throughout the state, in Presque Isle, Machias, Bangor, Augusta, Lewiston and Portland. Our staff handle cases in all 16 counties and in all 29 district courts. 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, providing direct legal assistance on a wide range of legal issues.

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. Pine Tree's websites, including statesidelegal.org for veterans and kidslegal.org for legal rights protecting children, were received a total of 2,455,797 page views in 2022.

We are seeing a significant demand for services. In 2022, we handled 12% more cases than the previous year.

Our statewide telephone intake system, which is the largest of the primary three ways that we accept new clients and cases, received a total of 10,328 intake calls from people seeking representation – an increase of 180% compared to 2019.

Due to funding and staffing limitations, we had to address 28% of calls for help with only general legal information or a referral to other resources, and could not open those as Pine Tree cases.

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. For example, for some callers requesting full legal representation, we only had enough capacity to provide more limited representation or advice.

We represent low-income Mainers statewide with no fees to our clients. 54% of our clients' incomes are below the poverty guidelines, and 86% are below 200% of the poverty guidelines.

Our numerous programs are designed to meet the diverse needs of Mainers while balancing our limited resources. Our practice areas and programs include:

- A statewide telephonic intake system, through which our staff currently receive an average of about 770 calls per month
- Five statewide practice Groups: Rental Housing, Consumer Law, Public Benefits, Family Law and Victim Rights, and Litigation
- Children's Rights Unit (KIDS LEGAL)
- Fair Housing Unit
- Farmworker Unit
- Foreclosure Prevention Unit
- Indigenous Peoples Unit
- Low Income Taxpayer Clinic
- Pro Bono Unit
- Veterans Unit
- Websites and community education

Since 1983, Pine Tree Legal Assistance has received an appropriation from the General Fund to provide services for low-income Mainers. Found on page A554 of this year's budget, this appropriation is a critical investment in stability for many of the most vulnerable members of our communities and helps keep people housed, employed, and healthy. The Supplemental Budget

for Fiscal Year 2022-23, Change Package F-A-2, increased the state's appropriation from \$500,000 per year, the amount appropriated since at least 2017, to \$650,000 per year, in order to fund our Veterans' Unit's ongoing partnership with Togus to serve Maine veterans in need. The current budget proposal would maintain that level of funding flat from the level appropriated last year, with no new initiatives.

I'd like to say a little more about our unique Medical Legal Partnership at the Togus VA Medical Center. A medical-legal partnership integrates the unique expertise of lawyers into health care settings to help clinicians, case managers, and social workers address civil legal issues at the root of many health challenges.

Our Togus medical legal partnership was one of the first in the country, just the eleventh established nationwide at the time we launched it several years ago using seed funding provided by a Maine-based private foundation. Since then, our Togus partnership has become a leader in delivery of legal services to veterans. The National Center for Medical Legal Partnerships used Pine Tree's materials to help develop a manual for best practices for newly developing veteran medical legal partnerships.

When a medical provider or other staff person at Togus or in one of the Community Based Outpatient Clinics, or CBOCs, around Maine identifies a veteran with a civil legal need, they can provide a direct referral to Pine Tree Legal Assistance, saving the veteran time and stress and ensuring efficient access to information and direct representation, when needed. A Pine Tree attorney regularly staffs an office at Togus to accept referrals and provide direct civil legal services to veterans.

We provide Maine veterans with legal assistance with veteran-specific issues such as discharge upgrades and character of service determinations, as well as with general civil legal needs related to housing stability, discrimination, social security and veterans' benefits. We help veterans with consumer protection issues, credit reporting, utility terminations, auto issues, debt related issues, medical billing problems.

In addition to direct legal services, Pine Tree also provides training to Togus medical and non-medical staff on how to identify civil legal needs of veterans that can improve health outcomes and their lives.

I'd like to share just two of the many examples of Pine Tree clients served through the state's appropriations.

“Mark” and “Sarah”

“Mark” and “Sarah” came to us at a loss after having paid on two mortgages for several years. Mark had been in the military and suffered significant injuries that eventually led to extremely limited mobility and the inability to climb stairs. Sarah, taking advantage of VA's

caretaker program, quit her job to take care of Mark full time. The couple initially attempted to modify their first home to accommodate Mark's limitations but found this to be untenable. Instead, they applied for and received a grant from the VA to build a new house that specifically addressed Mark's needs. Once this house was completed, Mark and Sarah put their first house on the market and for 3 years continued to pay both mortgages. Unfortunately, they were unable to find an interested buyer.

Recognizing that Mark and Sarah were only months away from being unable to afford both mortgages, we helped draft a Reasonable Accommodation request that asked the bank to take back the old house with a Deed-In-Lieu (DIL) and to waive any liability for a deficiency once the house was resold. After some back and forth, Pine Tree's attorney was able to convince the bank to agree to these terms and our clients signed the Deed. At the time of the signing, the Mark and Sarah owed close to \$350,000 on the loan, while a recent appraisal of the home valued it at only \$250,000. By signing the DIL, our clients were likely spared from owing the bank close to \$100,000 in a deficiency.

"Steve"

Steve is a service-connected disabled veteran who relies on his emotional support dog, Ollie. Several years ago, the middle of winter, Steve became homeless and was forced to move into a shelter. With the help of a case worker, Steve began looking apartments and eventually found one he really like. Steve contacted the landlord about renting the apartment and everything was progressing nicely until he mentioned Ollie. The landlord told him in no uncertain terms that he could not bring Ollie, in violation of fair housing laws protecting access to housing for people with disabilities. As a result, Steve had to spend an extra month in the shelter. Steve's case worker immediately contacted PTLA and we got to work on the case. Steve's case took several years to resolved but eventually he settled the case against the landlord and was extremely satisfied with the outcome. During the life of the case, Steve moved into an apartment that he really like and then into a house he purchased that he loves. Steve and Ollie now live happily together in a home all to themselves.

The state's allocation included in the budget is necessary to support access to civil legal aid in Maine, especially the Togus medical legal partnership. Continued funding at this level will enable PTLA to begin to expand the MLP, including by leveraging new funding that the VA has recently authorized for legal services for veterans at risk of homelessness and for which PTLA has just applied. With this allocation we will be able to continue to serve veterans and their family members, like Mark, Sarah, Steve, and many others.

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