



**Testimony of National Legal Aid & Defender Association 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 Radhika Singh, and I am the Vice President for Civil Legal Services and Strategic Policy Initiatives at the National Legal Aid & Defender Association. NLADA represents civil legal aid and public defenders, and the clients they serve, in every U.S. state and territory. Our civil and defender members serve the same low-income communities, ensuring they are safe, stable, and thriving. We strongly support LD 564.

Nationally, an estimated 74% of low-income people experience *at least one* civil legal problem each year.¹ In rural areas, 40% experience *at least five* civil legal problems. More than 360,000 Mainers are eligible for legal services but providers are only able to meet 20-35% of requests for assistance.

Without access to legal help, individuals and families are put at risk of severe life-altering outcomes in matters related to domestic violence, health care, housing, income support, and other basic human needs.

Multiple analyses have demonstrated clearly the difference civil legal aid makes, and I have included two demonstrative examples in my written submission.²

Robust state funding for legal aid is an urgent necessity. Federal funding is limited: while the Legal Services Corporation provides a strong national *infrastructure* for civil legal aid, its grants do not come close to meeting the need. Additionally, these funds have conditions that limit the types of advocacy available to attorneys and who they may represent.

Moreover, emergency pandemic funding is expiring, while the need for assistance continues to rise.

LD 564 is an investment, not a cost. Analyses from multiple jurisdictions demonstrate that civil legal aid pays for itself many times over. For example, Vermont has received a return of more than \$11 for every \$1 spent on legal aid.³

¹ Legal Services Corporation, *The Justice Gap: The Unmet Civil Legal Needs of Low-income Americans*, 2022, available at: <https://lsc-live.app.box.com/s/xl2v2uraiotbbzrhwtjlgj0emp3myz1>.

² See, Carolyn Copps Hartley, Lynette M. Renner, *The Longer-Term Influence of Civil Legal Services on Battered Women*, 2021, available at <https://www.ojp.gov/pdffiles1/nij/grants/249879.pdf> (a study in Iowa funded by the U.S. Department of Justice found that victims of physical domestic violence were around four times less likely to experience re-victimization over the short and long term); See, also, Elizabeth Benton, Margaret Dewar, Robert Goodspeed, Robert Gillett, *Reducing Michigan Evictions: The Pandemic and Beyond*, University of Michigan, June 2021, available at sites.fordschool.umich.edu/poverty2021/files/2021/05/Poverty-Solutions_Reducing-Michigan-Evictions_June2021.pdf (analysis of a large eviction diversion program found that 97 percent of participants who received extensive legal assistance avoided eviction).



Strong state funding also allows providers to leverage federal grants, as well as legal expertise from the private bar and law school clinics.

Additionally, since you also are considering investments in your public defender system, I would like to note why it is necessary to maximize support for both.

Low-income people are regulated at higher levels than other sectors of society, and the problems resolved through civil legal aid are often criminogenic. For example, people who are homeless are 11 times more likely to be arrested than people who are housed.⁴ Likewise, a strong defense minimizes the collateral consequences of involvement in the criminal system.

The need for adequate funding for legal aid is widely understood. In recent years, dozens of members of Congress from both parties, bipartisan coalitions of chief justices and state attorneys general, and hundreds of Fortune 500 business leaders have called for a stronger investment in civil legal aid.

LD 564 presents an opportunity to become a leader for equal justice, and we urge you to take it.

Thank you for your consideration.

³ Vermont Access to Justice Coalition, *Economic Impacts of Civil Legal Assistance Programs In Vermont* (2019), available at <https://vtbarfoundation.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/11/Economic-Impact-Study-Executive-Summary-and-Report-2.pdf>.

⁴ Madeline Bailey, Erica Crew & Madz Reeve, Vera Inst. of Just., *No Access to Justice: Breaking the Cycle of Homelessness and Jail 1* (2020), available at <https://www.vera.org/downloads/publications/no-access-to-justice.pdf>.

