



**Testimony of Jena Jones on Behalf of  
the Maine Council on Aging to the Committee on  
Judiciary**

**In Favor of LD 564 – An Act to Improve Access to  
Civil Legal Services**

Submitted on March 21, 2023

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

My name is Jena Jones, and I am the Director of Policy and Advocacy at the Maine Council on Aging (MCOA). The MCOA is a broad, multidisciplinary network of over 135 organizations, businesses, municipalities, and older community members working to ensure we can all live healthy, engaged and secure lives with choices and opportunities as we age at home and in community settings. I am testifying in favor of LD 564, *An Act to Improve Access to Civil Legal Services*.

We know that the ability to live a secure life by having access to justice as we age should be a basic human right afforded to us all. It is why it remains a core tenant of our overall mission and why we offer these words today. But this is not a current right afforded to all Mainers, and when faced with this stark reality it is imperative that we have the supports of civil legal services to see us through.

The efforts of LD 564, providing increases to vital civil legal services, will support work across Maine by amazing groups such as Legal Services for the Elderly, Disability Rights Maine, and the Maine Equal Justice Project. They provide crucial free information and services to Mainers facing foreclosure or eviction, elder abuse, disability discrimination and much more – services that are not granted as a right but are absolutely necessary.

Most of the 356,500 low-income Mainers eligible for free legal services, many of whom are older, will experience a civil legal issue at least once per year<sup>1</sup>, and as Maine’s affordable housing market continues to dwindle the demand for these services is rising.

In Maine, eviction rates among older adults are increasing due to compounding direct care and support workforce shortages. The causes are ranging from unaffordable rent increases to a lack of services to help folks do basic tasks like taking out the trash. Once in the courtroom, the odds

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<sup>1</sup> KFF State Health Facts, 2021. [Distribution of the Total Population by Federal Poverty Level \(above and below 200% FPL\) | KFF](#)

aren't equal. On average, 80% of landlords are represented by an attorney compared to only 20% of renters and having legal representation has been shown to decrease the likelihood of evictions.

Civil legal services keep people housed which makes increased funding a necessity, but it may still not be enough. According to the National Justice Index, States should have 10 legal aid attorneys per 10,000 people living 200% below the Federal Poverty Level. Maine currently has less than 2 legal aid attorneys by that measure. The funding allocated within LD 564 would bring us to around 3.6 attorneys.

These services, however, are not just effective at reducing evictions and protecting those who need it most from homelessness, they also provide preventative services that help address some of the challenges that predict homelessness. Civil legal aid also includes helping people access necessary healthcare or mental health services or preventing unfair debt collection practices.

All Mainers are owed the right to a secure life with access to the pursuit of justice whenever needed and there could not be a more timely effort to provide those services than now. The efforts of LD 564 will help to ensure that older adults across our state, regardless of income, will have the representation and supports they need when it matters most. We urge you to support LD 564.

Thank you.

Jena Jones