

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

My name is Robin Russel and I live in Hermon. I am a member of the Board of Directors of the Maine Justice Foundation and I am employed as a professor at the University of Maine. But, I started my professional career decades ago as an attorney working in a local legal services office. I later worked at a national legal services backup center. I then went back to school and received a PhD in social welfare policy and have been teaching ever since.

I worked in legal services at a time when there was adequate federal funding to provide legal representation to low-income people in civil cases. Our case loads were high, but I felt like we had the resources to provide quality representation to poor and vulnerable people. In the decades that followed, federal funding for indigent legal services was drastically reduced and legal representation for low-income people has suffered, nationally and here in Maine.

I currently teach courses on social welfare policy and teach our students about the workings of the legal system. While we discuss the principle of equal justice before the law, I tell my students that most people can get about as much justice as they can afford to pay for.

Currently more than 26% of Maine residents are low income and qualify for free legal services. Most of these people face at least one legal issue a year that would benefit from legal advice or representation. We have far too few legal services staff to meet this need. The National Justice Index advises states that they need 10 legal services attorneys per 10,000 people living below 200% of the poverty line. Maine falls far short of this standard at less than 2 attorneys per 10,000 low-income citizens.

As a legislature you enact laws that grant residents rights and services. But what good are these to a low-income person who cannot take advantage of them? We are talking about issues that directly impact the welfare of some of our most vulnerable residents; elders, children and adults with disabilities, victims of family violence and sexual assault.

Our legal services programs are providing educational materials on legal issues for residents. But, that doesn't take the place of having someone to represent you in court, especially when the opposing party has legal representation. I remember hearing in law school that a person who has themselves as an attorney, has a fool for a client. In Maine a poor person needing a lawyer may not be a fool, they just don't have other options.

I strongly urge you to vote in favor of LD564. Let's make equal justice before the law more of a reality in Maine.

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