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United Way  
of Southern Maine



Hello Senator Carney and members of the Judiciary Committee. My name is Taylor Cray, and I am the Outreach Team Leader for Advocacy at Preble Street. In this role, I support Homeless Voices for Justice, a group of individuals with lived experience of homelessness and poverty. I am writing to you today to ask that you support LD564: An Act to Improve Access to Civil Legal Aid Services.

Both Preble Street and Homeless Voices for Justice work to represent a body of individuals who have been greatly impacted by poverty, homelessness, food-insecurity, and other life-threatening challenges. In much of the work that we do, we see first-hand the impact of insufficient civil legal representation in the lives of our clients. Many individuals arrive at Preble Street in a state of desperation because they owe large amounts of money in child support, have been denied benefits, have been evicted, or have a family law matter.

The stories are numerous and varied, but all retain the underlying distress that comes from the knowledge that you are unable to defend yourself and your family in a court of law. Our clients tell stories of children lost to custody battles, evictions that resulted in children being removed from their care by Child Protective Services, and the ongoing toll that civil legal losses have on their lives. We know of clients who have lost custody of their children due to falsified reports given in court by abusive partners, forcing these individuals to learn the inner working of the civil legal system themselves or risk losing access to their children forever. We hear stories of parents reconnecting with their children after years of disconnect due to legal battles, evictions, and homelessness. These stories show the cruel reality of a legal system that does not ensure adequate representation for all individuals.

LD564 presents an opportunity to fund civil legal aid programs that will allow individuals in similar situations to access the help they need to navigate a complex legal system. The impacts of these civil legal cases often follow individuals for life, and the ability to access legal aid cannot be understated. Preble Street works alongside the Volunteer Lawyers Project to provide legal advice to our clients through the Maine Homeless Legal Project. Funding limitations, however, prevent us from offering legal representation to clients when they go to court. Organizations like Maine Equal Justice and Pine Tree Legal help to fill these gaps, but oftentimes clients end up in court without the legal representation that they need to navigate these complex systems. The funding provided by this bill will help to increase access to civil legal aid for individuals regardless of their financial status. Everyone deserves the chance to be fairly represented in a court of law.

With this in mind, we ask that you vote in favor of LD564: An Act to Improve Access to Civil Legal Aid Services. Thank you for your time and consideration.

Sincerely,

Taylor Cray

Team Leader, Homeless Voices for Justice

Preble Street

