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LD 375

Testimony in Support of "An Act to Require the University of Maine School of Law to Provide an Online Degree Program"
Submitted to the Committee on Education and Cultural Affairs

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Senator Stewart, Representative Joseph Rafferty, and distinguished members of the Committee on Education and Cultural Affairs,

I am writing in strong support of LD 375, "An Act to Require the University of Maine School of Law to Provide an Online Degree Program," presented by Senator Stewart of Aroostook and cosponsored by Senators Bailey of York, Carney of Cumberland, Duson of Cumberland, Libby of Cumberland, and Rafferty of York.

As a long-time resident of Downeast Maine since 1990, a small business owner, and an IEP Administrator working in special education, I have witnessed firsthand the significant barriers that prevent individuals from accessing higher education—particularly legal education—outside of Southern Maine.

My personal interest in the law was sparked through my own experience navigating the legal system. When I had to represent myself pro se in a defamation case, I saw firsthand how complex legal advocacy can be and how difficult it is to find affordable legal representation, particularly in rural Maine. That experience ignited a passion for the law, but the reality remains that attending law school in Portland is simply not feasible for me or for many others in Downeast Maine.

Like many rural Mainers, I cannot relocate or commute long distances due to my professional, financial, and family obligations. The current inaccessibility of legal education exacerbates Maine's ongoing shortage of attorneys, particularly in rural communities where legal services are already scarce. This shortage has real consequences—residents struggle to find legal representation, and critical needs in family law, probate, special education, and other essential areas go unmet.

Beyond addressing the immediate shortage of attorneys, increasing opportunities such as these for Maine students—both traditional and non-traditional—will ensure that we are not always in dire need of legal services. By providing a pathway for students to train here in Maine, we increase the likelihood that they will remain within our communities as engaged and productive citizens. Keeping talent local strengthens our legal system, enhances community stability, and ensures continuity of service for the people of Maine.

Additionally, the economic benefits of expanding legal education are clear. Increasing access to law degrees will allow more Mainers to become small business owners, public defenders, and legal advocates, reducing the delays and bottlenecks in our judicial system. Small businesses, municipalities, and individuals will have greater access to affordable legal services, making Maine's economy more resilient.

Maine is not alone in facing this challenge. Across the country, accredited law schools have successfully implemented hybrid and fully online J.D. programs, proving that rigorous, high-quality legal education can be delivered remotely. The American Bar Association has expanded approval for online models, recognizing that flexibility is essential for today's students.

Furthermore, Maine's vast geography presents unique challenges that an online law program would help address. Many counties in our state have a critical shortage of attorneys, with some residents forced to travel hours for basic legal assistance. Public defenders, family law attorneys, and probate lawyers are in particularly short supply, leaving vulnerable Mainers without adequate representation. A fully online program

would encourage individuals from these underserved areas to obtain a law degree and return to their communities to practice, directly addressing the "legal deserts" that exist throughout our state.

Higher education has already embraced online and hybrid models in fields such as nursing and education to address workforce shortages. The legal profession must follow suit. Expanding access to legal education through an online program at the University of Maine School of Law is not just an opportunity—it is a necessity for Maine's future.

I urge this committee to support this bill and take meaningful action to expand access to legal education for all Mainers—especially those in rural areas. Thank you for your time and consideration.

Respectfully,
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