

Testimony of Elizabeth Shardlow, in partial support of LD375: An Act to Require the University of Maine School of Law to Provide an Online Degree Program

**Joint Standing Committee on Education and Cultural Affairs
Monday, March 3, 2025**

Senator Rafferty, Representative Murphy, and esteemed members of the Committee on Education and Cultural Affairs, I am offering my testimony in *partial* support of LD 375, An Act to Require the University of Maine School of Law to Provide an Online Degree Program.

I am a licensed attorney practicing in the District Courts at Augusta, Lewiston, Rumford, and Waterville. I am only able to work out of some of these courts because they are completely remote. More relevant to this legislation, I am also a member of the most recent graduating class of the University of Maine School of Law.

The last time I testified before this Committee I was merely a high school graduate. I began my college career in my late 30's at the University of Maine at Augusta in 2019, enrolling full-time in both on-campus and online classes. I graduated two years later, having earned a bachelor's degree with two minors and four certificates. I finished my undergraduate degree with a 4.0 GPA while working full-time and parenting my four school-aged children through the adventures of Covid. A high-quality online education is available at nearly every level in Maine, except when it comes to law school.

In addition to Maine Law, I also considered two schools with ABA-approved hybrid programs. They offered an extended degree program where classes stretched over four years instead of three, and on-campus attendance was required either once per month or once per semester. Ultimately, I chose Maine Law because of affordability and time; I was offered a full tuition merit scholarship to Maine Law, and I didn't want to stretch my law degree out any longer than necessary because of the sacrifices that my family had to make while I was in school. In addition to the rigor of my legal education, I was gone from home five days per week, sometimes from before dawn until after dark, and I commuted more than an hour each way.

There are other ABA-approved online programs that would have fit better with my family's needs, but they focus on business or intellectual property law. I specifically chose a public interest pathway for my legal education, and the only change I would suggest to LD375 is to not follow the path of other law schools that offer online programs but only in certain focus areas. It is imperative that Maine Law not just offer an online program but also do so in a way that truly helps to solve the issues facing this state, particularly the shortage of attorneys in rural areas. To accomplish this, Maine must offer an online program that addresses our state's current needs.

We desperately need more attorneys in the rural parts of Maine, and we desperately need more attorneys to do public defense work. This legislation is an opportunity to help address those shortages. You are undoubtedly familiar with the constitutional crisis we are facing right now,

particular in criminal defense and child welfare cases. I encourage you to consider the impact that an online law degree program could have on the safety and well-being of Maine families, and the opportunity that it could present to bring new talent to Maine. This shortage is not going to end any time soon; these cases can carry on for years, and we must do something now to start to address the problem.

Maine Law already has the ability to offer online and hybrid classes. The technology is there, and the taxpayers have already paid for it. They held classes online during Covid, and they can do the same thing now, but with better technology in the new, state of the art building at 300 Fore Street. I used this technology when I was at Maine Law, and I use this technology in practice multiple times each week to attend court proceedings and client meetings. If the use of technology is appropriate for legal practice, then it is appropriate for legal education.

As Maine's only and public law school, it is vital that changes are made now so we can begin to solve this crisis, and that solution necessitates opening the door to more opportunities. With that, I ask you to please vote *out to pass* on LD375 but suggest an amendment to the bill to require that an online offering include public interest and broader educational pathways.

Respectfully,

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