

Testimony of Genevieve McDonald
Before the Joint Standing Committee on Education and Cultural Affairs
Testifying in FAVOR of L.D. 375
An Act to Require the University of Maine School of Law to Provide an Online Degree Program

March 3 2025

Senator Rafferty, Representative Murphy, and Distinguished Members of the Joint Standing Committee on Education and Cultural Affairs, I am Genevieve McDonald of Stonington, and I am testifying in favor of **L.D. 375 An Act to Require the University of Maine School of Law to Provide an Online Degree Program.**

Each year, the University of Maine School of Law hosts a "Law School for Legislators" seminar. I had the opportunity to attend in 2020—at the height of the COVID-19 pandemic—when all courses were being taught remotely. At that time, there was a sense of possibility surrounding virtual learning, along with a strong belief that Maine Law would expand its online offerings once the pandemic ended.

Motivated by that possibility, I took the LSAT, submitted my application, and was accepted, to both Maine Law and Northeastern. I chose not to run for re-election to the Legislature in anticipation of beginning law school. Maine Law chose against modernizing its delivery model, continuing to offer its JD program exclusively in person, in Portland.

I tried to convince myself that commuting from my home in Stonington to Portland would be manageable—that it wasn't that much further than my previous commute to Augusta. After two weeks of classes, it became clear that this was not feasible. I withdrew on the final day I could receive a tuition refund.

My family is deeply rooted in our community. I have two children in our local schools. I own my home. My husband works as a foreman at his family's business. Relocating to Portland is not an option for us—and more importantly, it shouldn't have to be. Maine is home to an untapped

resource of working professionals who are established in rural communities, who want to further their education, and who are well positioned to serve the people of our state. We cannot continue to lament the shortage of lawyers in Maine while making legal education accessible only to those who can relocate to Southern Maine. Even Maine Law's part time, in person JD program does not attempt to overcome these barriers. It requires attendance in Portland three days a week—Tuesday, Thursday, and Friday.

I earned my undergraduate degree from the University of Maine in 2018, entirely online. Our public universities offer master's degrees and doctorate programs virtually. We conduct medical appointments, business meetings, legislative hearings, certain court proceedings, and conduct the important work of government—online.

Maine Law could follow this lead by building a modern JD program where in person requirements are the exception rather than the rule. I respect that some aspects of legal education may require in person instruction. However, Maine Law can design a program that blends high-quality virtual coursework with targeted, well planned in person components just as other institutions and degree programs have done.

I am a former foster youth, an emancipated minor, a lobster boat captain, a summa cum laude graduate of the University of Maine, a mother of twins, a former state legislator, the chair of both my local school board and my school union board, and a Senior Policy Advisor at Preti Strategies. I can do hard things—but I cannot obtain a legal education in the state of Maine.

Thank you for your time and consideration.