

March 11, 2025

Sen. Michael Tipping, Chair
Rep. Amy Roeder, Chair
Joint Standing Committee on Labor
Maine State Legislature
100 Statehouse Station
Augusta, ME 04333

Re: ***LD 530, An Act Regarding Occupational Licensure Reform***

Dear Sen. Tipping, Rep. Roeder, and Members of the Labor Committee:

I am writing in my capacity as a licensed Maine attorney and as executive director of the Center for Justice and Human Dignity in support of LD 530. The Center for Justice and Human Dignity’s mission is safely expanding innovative and effective alternatives to incarceration while improving conditions for incarcerated people and correctional staff. We also work to improve reentry-related policies, practices, and outcomes—including addressing post-release employment and professional licensure barriers.

Applicants to become Maine attorneys must be found by the Board of Bar Examiners (Board) to have “good moral character.” 4 M.R.S. § 805-A(2). Under current law, an applicant previously convicted of a crime punishable by imprisonment of one year or more faces a *presumption* that they do not meet the good moral character requirement. 4 M.R.S. § 805-A(2)(a)(1). This amendment does not seek to alter the Board’s or the Supreme Judicial Court’s factors when considering whether an applicant meets the good moral character requirement, nor does it impede on the Board or Court’s powers to make that determination. The amendment only removes the presumption that the applicant lacks the good moral character necessary to practice law.

In addition to the values and priorities of our organization, it is my own lived experience that calls me to support this amendment. While I was ultimately determined to meet the moral requirements to practice law by the Board, the process was unnecessarily adversarial. Intense and emotional hearings were held where an Assistant Attorney General “presents the case against the applicant” when representing the Board. The presumption that an applicant ever convicted of any crime punishable by imprisonment of one year or more lacks the moral character to practice law is one of the driving factors making this process more adversarial than necessary. The intent of

the character and fitness process is to protect the public and the integrity of the legal profession, rather than repunish the applicant, and this can be better achieved by adopting this amendment.

After becoming an attorney, I had the honor and privilege of directing the Washington Statewide Reentry Council and later serving in the Washington State Department of Corrections leadership. I currently serve as an active first responder on a mountain rescue team and work very closely with law enforcement and correctional leaders and officers in multiple capacities. I share all this only to note what can be possible after incarceration with the hope that you may consider removing the current presumption.

It is also important to acknowledge that the state's rural areas face a shortage of attorneys. This amendment would in no way compromise the requirements to become an attorney but may encourage additional applicants with lived experience in the criminal justice system to explore a legal career, potentially increasing access to much needed legal services throughout the state.

We understand that the Bar Association is interested in engaging with key stakeholders on this topic before taking a position, which I agree with and support. We acknowledge the importance of discussing this topic with the Bar Association, Board of Bar Examiners, and the Supreme Judicial Court and welcome those conversations prior to the prospective final passage of the proposed amendment.

Respectfully,



Christopher Poulos
Executive Director