

Good afternoon, Senator Carney, Representative Kuhn, and Esteemed Members of the Judiciary Committee. My name is Kathryn A. Reid, Esq.. I am the Interim Executive Director of the Maine Volunteer Lawyers Project, also known as VLP. On behalf of VLP, I am submitting this testimony in support of LD 1022 *An Act to Protect and Increase Access to Justice in Civil Legal Aid Matters for Persons with Low Incomes*.

VLP is one of Maine's civil legal aid providers. Our mission is to connect volunteer attorneys with individuals needing legal assistance with civil matters, promoting equal access to justice. VLP's legal services are provided entirely by volunteer attorneys, who are recruited, supported, and coordinated by our small staff of nine. VLP staff also handle all aspects of client intake, eligibility screening, and scheduling. We provide services to individuals in all 16 counties.

We are grateful for the inclusion of funding for civil legal aid in LD 1022. The funding VLP receives through the State of Maine Civil Legal Services Fund is one of the most important sources of support for our work, and we apply it across all programs statewide.

Family law and related matters are a substantial focus of our work. We also help clients with legal problems involving protection from abuse, employment, probate, small claims, property, bankruptcy, and unemployment and disability benefits appeals. With support from VLP staff, our volunteer attorneys help people in courthouses and through our many virtual clinics to ensure that our services are accessible to those who need them.

We give priority to clients with particularly high barriers to obtaining legal help or effectively representing themselves, including people with Limited English Proficiency, disabilities, who live in rural locations, or who cannot be served by other programs. We place special emphasis on providing legal help to survivors of domestic violence in family matters, protection from abuse, and related civil matters.

Although the Maine courts make every effort to be accessible, the judicial system is by necessity complex and can be difficult to navigate. Most people need the help of an attorney to do so – and those unable to afford an attorney are at greatest risk of not receiving equal access to justice as a result. State investment in civil legal aid is one of the greatest safeguards to ensure access to justice for all Mainers.

In 2023, the Legislature appropriated an additional \$4 million in one-time funding for civil legal aid to meet critical and rising legal needs. Without converting this one-time funding into ongoing support, Maine civil legal aid providers will face significant and harmful cuts when the funding expires in June 2025. This means that Maine people will have fewer places to turn for help. Sustaining and increasing this investment in civil legal aid is crucial for maintaining access to justice and well-functioning judicial and economic systems in Maine. Therefore, we respectfully request support for LD 1022 including the annual appropriations and allocations as set forth therein.

Respectfully Submitted,
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Interim Executive Director/Pro Bono Engagement Director
Maine Volunteer Lawyers Project