



**Testimony of the National Legal Aid & Defender Association in support of
LD 1022 An Act to Protect and Increase Access to Justice in Civil
Legal Matters for Persons with Low Incomes**

Senator Carney, Representative Kuhn, and esteemed members of the Judiciary Committee:

The National Legal Aid & Defender Association (NLADA) respectfully submits this testimony in support of LD 1022. NLADA represents civil legal aid providers, public defenders and the clients they serve in every U.S. state and territory. The essence of NLADA is centered on a basic understanding that our civil and defender members serve the same low-income communities and strive toward the same end goal: securing safety and stability for individuals, families and communities across the country. We strongly support LD 1022.

We know Maine is faced with critical decisions on how best to support essential services across your great state. As people and states across the country face great financial strain, the urgency of funding legal services at this moment cannot be overstated. Legal services help people build a foundation on which to steady themselves and opens pathways to stability and opportunity.

Maine's network of civil legal aid providers is exemplary, as is Maine's previous investment in civil legal aid. It is not possible to speak too highly of the people who comprise your legal aid community, or of the quality of services they provide. But it is even more important to understand why they provide these services. Legal aid is and always has been about the difference made for the people served.

Every day, your civil legal aid providers work to ensure no Mainers are left behind. But civil legal aid remains under-resourced. Nationally, an estimated 74% of low-income people experience *at least one* civil legal problem each year. In rural areas, 40% experience *at least five* civil legal problems.¹ These needs are only growing as people across the country face economic uncertainty and access to basic services and support is becoming more difficult. This is especially true for people in rural areas, who may have limited access to transportation and internet.

Robust state funding for civil legal aid is an urgent necessity. While various streams of federal funding have provided a foundation for legal aid, this has been insufficient and is wrought with uncertainty. Without access to legal help, individuals and families are put at risk of severe life-altering outcomes in matters related to domestic violence, health care, housing, income support and other basic needs. Civil Legal aid also ensures children in need can receive an education and removes barriers to steady employment.

¹ Legal Services Corporation, *The Justice Gap: The Unmet Civil Legal Needs of Low-income Americans*, 2022, available at: <https://lsc-live.app.box.com/s/xl2v2uraiotbbzrhwtjlg0emp3myz1>.



Investing in civil legal services not only is critical, but also wise. Across the country, for every \$1 invested, civil legal aid returns an average of \$7, with direct returns to individuals, families and taxpayers, while also fueling long-term economic growth and community stability.² Maine's own study found civil legal aid's annual economic impact to be greater than \$100 million.³

Moreover, civil legal aid is central to ensuring the accessibility and effectiveness of other support programs. For example, legal aid helps people access services and support to end cycles of domestic violence.⁴ It also helps people access and retain affordable and safe housing.⁵ Civil legal aid helps make all other investments work, and insufficient funding for civil legal aid undermines the effectiveness of a wide array of supports ranging from access to education to safety from violence.

Similarly, as Maine strives to meet its obligation to provide public defense services, it is important to note how necessary it is to maximize support for both civil and criminal legal services. As noted above, civil legal aid and public defenders serve the same low-income communities. Indeed, for people with lower incomes, involvement in the civil and criminal legal systems can be indistinguishable, and often inextricably tied. The problems resolved through civil legal aid often are criminogenic. For example, people who are homeless are 11 times more likely to be arrested than people who are housed.⁶ Likewise, a strong defense minimizes the collateral consequences of involvement in the criminal system.

Finally, we note that LD 1022 as introduced imposes a cap on income-based eligibility at 200% of the poverty line. This limit is detrimental to the effectiveness of civil legal aid, and to the people it serves. Perhaps the starkest example of this effect is the domestic violence victim seeking safety who is deemed ineligible due to the income of their abusive partner. But the effects of such a limit reach beyond this one category. For many, the difference between 200% and 225% of the poverty line is not enough to pay for legal services.⁷ Denied access to legal aid, these people may quickly fall into the spirals of instability civil legal aid ends and prevents. Civil legal aid providers house expertise and hold

² Legal Services Corporation, *The Economic Case for Civil Legal Aid: A Systematic Review of Economic Impact Studies*, 2025, available at: <https://lsc-live.app.box.com/s/0ldo54a34zc7s3dgp6ci2ra8r5qb61lf>.

³ Gabe, Todd, *Economic Impact of Civil Legal Aid Services in Maine*, 2015, available at: <https://justicemaine.org/wp-content/uploads/Gabe-Report-Submitted-November-14-2016.pdf>.

⁴ See, Carolyn Copps Hartley, Lynette M. Renner, *The Longer-Term Influence of Civil Legal Services on Battered Women*, 2021, available at <https://www.ojp.gov/pdffiles1/nij/grants/249879.pdf> (a study in Iowa funded by the U.S. Department of Justice found that victims of physical domestic violence were around four times less likely to experience re-victimization over the short and long term).

⁵ See, Elizabeth Benton, Margaret Dewar, Robert Goodspeed, Robert Gillett, *Reducing Michigan Evictions: The Pandemic and Beyond*, University of Michigan, June 2021, available at sites.fordschool.umich.edu/poverty2021/files/2021/05/Poverty-Solutions-Reducing-Michigan-Evictions-June2021.pdf (analysis of a large eviction diversion program found that 97 percent of participants who received extensive legal assistance avoided eviction).

⁶ Madeline Bailey, Erica Crew & Madz Reeve, Vera Inst. of Just., *No Access to Justice: Breaking the Cycle of Homelessness and Jail 1 (2020)*, available at <https://www.vera.org/downloads/publications/no-access-to-justice.pdf>.

⁷ See, U.S. Dept. of Health and Human Services, Office of the Assistant Secretary for Planning and Evaluation, *2025 Poverty Guidelines: 48 Contiguous States (all states except Alaska and Hawaii)*, available at: [detailed-guidelines-2025.pdf](https://www.dhs.gov/2025-poverty-guidelines).



connections to other human services providers, which uniquely situates them to determine who is most in danger and most in need in the communities they serve.

The need for adequate funding for legal aid is widely understood. In recent years, dozens of members of Congress from both parties, bipartisan coalitions of chief justices and state attorneys general, and hundreds of Fortune 500 business leaders have called for a stronger investment in civil legal aid.

Maine has been a leader in recognizing the urgency of investing in civil legal aid, and times have become even more tumultuous. We urge you to seize the moment presented to enhance your support. LD 1022 not only will strengthen civil legal aid, but it also will strengthen Maine itself.

Respectfully submitted,

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read "Radhika Singh".

Vice President

Civil Legal Services & Strategic Policy Initiatives

