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April 17, 2025 Testimony in Support of LD 1022: An Act to Protect and Increase Access to Justice in Civil Legal Matters for Persons with Low Incomes

Greetings Senator Carney, Representative Moonen and members of the Joint Standing Committee on Judiciary. I am Jane Margesson, Senior Communications Director for AARP Maine.

AARP is the nation's largest nonprofit, nonpartisan organization dedicated to empowering Americans 50 and older to choose how they live as they age. On behalf of our nearly 200,000 members statewide, thank you for the opportunity to share testimony. Today, I am testifying in support of LD 1022: An Act to Protect and Increase Access to Justice in Civil Legal Matters for Persons with Low Incomes.

As we know, older adults have unique health and social needs. Many are on fixed incomes and depend on government benefits and services that have complex requirements. Navigating this system alone can require access to competent and often expensive legal assistance. Further, approximately 10 percent of older adults report experiencing at least one form of abuse each year, although it is widely accepted that elder abuse is significantly under-reported.¹

Individuals at risk of eviction, domestic violence, elder abuse, denial of veterans' benefits, and more, rely on these legal services to maintain their quality of life. Adequate access to legal aid is necessary in Maine to protect some of our more vulnerable older adults from harm, as, according to Legal Services for Maine Elders, 56 percent of low-income older Mainers face a legal problem annually.²

While legal aid providers serve every county, many Mainers still go without the help they need. The demand for services far exceeds current resources, leaving significant unmet need across the state. Sustained and increased funding is critical to ensuring that every Mainer—no matter their ZIP code—can access the legal help they require. Even now, according to the National Justice Index, states need 10 legal aid attorneys per 10,000 people living below 200 percent of the poverty line. Maine currently has only 3 such

¹ <https://nij.ojp.gov/library/publications/prevalence-estimates-and-correlates-elder-abuse-united-states-national-0>; <https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/abs/pii/S1359178918303471?via%3Dihub>

² <https://mainelse.org/sites/default/files/2023-09/9.20.23%20Draft%202022%20Annual%20Report.pdf>

attorneys per 10,000 people, and those with low income are the ones most likely to suffer if funding falls.³

Without legislative action supporting LD 1022, legal aid services will be cut—just as demand continues to rise—leaving many constituents without necessary legal help. One-time funding is not enough—ongoing investment is essential to retain experienced attorneys and other professionals, and to ensure Mainers’ legal needs are met.

Having access to legal assistance is critical to Maine’s most vulnerable older adults. Legal assistance can help older adults in some of the most important aspects of their life including housing, economic security, self-determination, protection from abuse and health and safety. We urge you to protect low-income older adults, and all low-income Mainers, by supporting LD 1022.

Thank you for the opportunity to testify. I can be reached at jmargesson@aarp.org

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³ Justice Action Group Legislative Committee - February 2025

