

GINA TURCOTTE  
SIDNEY  
LD 1650

My name is GinA Turcotte. I proposed and am testifying in support of LD #1650 An Act to Allow Paralegals to Be Paid by the Maine Commission on Public Defense Services.

As we try to find solutions to our current court crisis, I have heard very little about paralegals' ability to help resolve it. What exactly do the public defense attorneys need? At least one answer is: more help to do the work that is constitutionally required for each defendant. Who do attorneys typically depend on to help them? Paralegals.

I am a litigation paralegal and have worked in the legal industry for over 30 years, first as a legal secretary and then as a paralegal for the past several years for an attorney with 60yrs of practice. Working alongside and being mentored by seasoned attorneys has provided me with professional competence and skills comparable to those attorneys' skills.

I recently worked with Attorney Jennifer Cohen and was paid by the Commission under court order for a pro se criminal defendant. Upon reviewing the Commission's fee schedule at Ch. 301, Sec. 3(1), it allows for payment of fees and reimbursement for paralegal services through non-counsel cost procedures, but it does not expressly authorize public defense attorneys to hire paralegals at the Commission's expense. I believe the Commission's rules and our state laws need to expressly authorize, and perhaps even require, public defense attorneys to hire a minimum of 2 paralegals to assist with indigent clients' cases at the Commission's expense and set out a fee schedule for that paralegal work.

By allowing public defense attorneys to hire paralegals who are paid by the Commission, those paralegals can maintain contact with clients, communicate with other parties, and do the legal work that does not need to be done by the attorneys which will naturally increase the attorneys' productivity and legal effectiveness while their invoices will decrease. Given that the average labor market rate for paralegals in Maine, depending on region, is \$30/hr, and public defenders are now receiving \$150/hr, indigent clients will benefit from five times the amount of work by paralegals for the same cost as one hour of work by their public defender.

In closing, by enacting this bill into law, not only will it alleviate the financial burden on taxpayers, but it will also provide hundreds of good paying jobs for people who want to work as paralegals to provide indigent defendants with the legal defense they are entitled to receive. If this bill is scrutinized objectively, its enactment into law would create a win win situation for the courts, taxpayers, attorneys and indigent defendants and would most assuredly reduce the court docket at a faster speed. Thank you for your attention and allowing me to testify. I would be happy to answer any questions you may have.