



**TESTIMONY OF GLBTQ LEGAL ADVOCATES & DEFENDERS  
IN SUPPORT OF  
LD 1691, AN ACT TO EXPAND ACCESS TO JUSTICE IN RURAL MAINE BY  
INCENTIVIZING ATTORNEYS TO PRACTICE IN UNDERSERVED AREAS**

Committee on Education and Cultural Affairs

May 15, 2025

Dear Senator Rafferty, Representative Murphy, and Distinguished Members of the Committee on Education and Cultural Affairs,

GLBTQ Legal Advocates & Defenders (GLAD Law) is a nonprofit legal organization that works in New England and nationally to create a just society free of discrimination based on gender identity and expression, HIV status, and sexual orientation. We appreciate the opportunity to submit this testimony in strong support of LD 1691, An Act to Expand Access to Justice in Rural Maine by Incentivizing Attorneys to Practice in Underserved Areas.

Access to justice is a cornerstone of a functioning democracy. Yet for too many Mainers, particularly in rural and underserved communities, meaningful legal representation remains out of reach.<sup>1</sup> Individuals and families regularly face significant financial and geographic barriers to finding timely, affordable, and culturally competent legal help.<sup>2</sup> LD 1691 takes meaningful and necessary steps to address this justice gap by expanding loan support and building new educational pathways for law students and attorneys to serve where they are needed most.

The Access to Justice Loan Program, as outlined in this bill, provides a compelling mechanism in addressing the dual burdens of law school debt and attorney shortages in underserved and rural areas of Maine.<sup>3</sup> By offering up to \$25,000 annually in forgivable loans or

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<sup>1</sup> University of Maine School of Law, *Expanding Access to Justice in Rural Maine Through Maine Law's Rural Practice Clinic*, Report to the 131<sup>st</sup> Maine Legislature at 1 (Jan. 16, 2024), <https://legislature.maine.gov/doc/11049>. (“More than half of all attorneys practicing in Maine are based in Cumberland County, but the majority of the state’s population lives rurally.”) See also *Report and Recommendations of the Board of Overseers of the Bar’s Task Force to Study Bar Demographics*, Maine Board of Overseers of the Bar at 1 (June 2014), <https://www.mebaroverseers.org/DemographicsTaskForce/Docs/Task%20Force%20Report%20-%206.14.pdf>.

<sup>2</sup> *Expanding Access to Justice*, *supra* note 1 at 1. (“In those less populated areas, access to an attorney, especially by low-income litigants, has become increasingly difficult for those facing criminal charges, child protection proceedings, juvenile justice complaints, as well as landlord-tenant litigation, family cases, domestic violence proceedings, and other civil matters. Some litigants are forced to proceed without the benefit of legal assistance.”)

<sup>3</sup> *Report and Recommendations*, *supra* note 1 at 3, 8. (Note South Dakota’s Rural Attorney Recruitment Program). See also Professor Dierdre Smith, *Don’t let rural Maine become a ‘legal desert’*, University of Maine Law (April 29, 2020), <https://mainelaw.maine.edu/faculty/dont-let-rural-maine-become-a-legal-desert/>. (“Young lawyers anxious about repaying student-loan debt or concerned about professional isolation are more likely to seek

repayment assistance for legal professionals who practice in rural and underserved areas, LD 1691 affirms a critical truth: legal service is public service, and Maine is willing to invest accordingly.

We are especially encouraged by the bill’s inclusion of a rural practice track at the University of Maine School of Law, which thoughtfully recognizes that long-term change requires early and sustained investment.<sup>4</sup> By recruiting law students and embedding them in rural and underserved placements, and supporting them with housing stipends and structured mentorship, LD 1691 nurtures a generation of attorneys more likely to remain in and serve the communities they know.<sup>5</sup> The track also recognizes the importance of building partnerships across educational levels and geographic regions, a contributing factor for successful rural workforce retention.<sup>6</sup>

GLAD Law believes this bill will not only increase access to justice for rural Mainers but will also foster a more inclusive legal system. Far too often, underrepresented groups, including LGBTQ+ and low-income individuals, and people of color, face heightened barriers in securing competent legal representation.<sup>7</sup> By increasing the presence of attorneys across the state who are dedicated to rural and underrepresented populations, LD 1691 will help to reduce disparities in legal representation.<sup>8</sup>

Moreover, this initiative comes at a critical time. Like many states, Maine faces an aging bar and dwindling numbers of rural practitioners.<sup>9</sup> Without bold and proactive investment, the

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practices in cities or larger towns where salaries are higher and professional opportunities greater.”); Dan Kittay, *Success on the horizon? New efforts to increase rural access to justice*, American Bar Association (May 1, 2022), [https://www.americanbar.org/groups/bar-leadership/publications/bar\\_leader/2021\\_22/may-june/success-on-the-horizon-new-efforts-to-increase-rural-access-to-justice/?login](https://www.americanbar.org/groups/bar-leadership/publications/bar_leader/2021_22/may-june/success-on-the-horizon-new-efforts-to-increase-rural-access-to-justice/?login).

<sup>4</sup> Report from Dean Leigh Saufley to Joint Standing Committees on Education & Cultural Affairs, Judiciary, Appropriations & Financial Affairs, *Report on the Success of Maine law’s Rural Practice Clinic* at 2-3 (Jan. 15, 2025), <https://legislature.maine.gov/doc/11375>.

<sup>5</sup> *Expanding Access to Justice in Rural Maine*, *supra* note 1 at 6. (“As the state’s public and only law school, Maine law will continue to provide the majority of new attorneys throughout the state. Approximately 85 students graduate from Maine Law each year. In recent years, as many as 80% of those graduates stay in Maine.”) See generally Office for Access to Justice, U.S. Dept. of Justice, *Fact Sheet: Access to Justice is Rural Access* (Feb. 20, 2025), <https://www.justice.gov/atj/fact-sheet-access-justice-rural-access>.

<sup>6</sup> *Id* at 4. (Students and staff of the Maine Law clinic “also function as liaisons between UMFK undergraduates and Maine Law. . . programs. . . have the potential to bolster law school enrollment among students with rural ties.”). *Report and Recommendations*, *supra* note 1 at 4, 8. (Note the recommendation about educating law students about rural practice.)

<sup>7</sup> Legal Services Corporation, *The Justice GAP: The Unmet Civil Legal Needs of Low-income Americans*, at 23, 49 (2022), <https://lsc-live.app.box.com/s/xl2v2uraiothbbzrhwtjlgj0emp3myz1>. See generally Legal Services NYC, *Poverty is an LGBT Issue: An Assessment of the Legal Needs of Low-Income LGBT People* (Jan. 2016), <https://lgbtqbar.org/annual/wp-content/uploads/sites/7/2016/06/3-Protected-and-Served-21-83.pdf> (Cited by the National LGBTQ+ Bar Association and the State of Massachusetts, this report highlights different barriers LGBTQ+ populations face in accessing legal services.)

<sup>8</sup> See generally, ACLU Maine, *A Growing Crisis: The Right to Counsel Denied in Maine* (May 6, 2025), <https://www.aclumaine.org/en/mainesgrowingcrisis#:~:text=We%20sued%20the%20state%20in,denied%20their%20right%20to%20counsel>.

<sup>9</sup> *Report and Recommendations*, *supra* note 1, at 9-10. (In 2014, “the largest percent of registered attorneys [were] between 55 and 64 years of age, an age group for which retirement plans are likely being contemplated. . .

gap between legal need and available legal services will continue to widen. LD 1691 offers the Legislature a forward-looking approach to addressing the legal needs of rural Mainers while supporting the next generation of attorneys committed to public service.

**GLAD Law respectfully urges the Committee to support the passage of LD 1691.** By investing in pathways that expand access to justice, the Legislature can help ensure that all Mainers, regardless of where they live, can receive the legal support they need and deserve.

Sincerely,

Hannah Hussey, Staff Attorney, GLAD Law

Portland, Maine

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new admittees between the ages of 25 and 34 are working and living primarily in the greater Portland area. . .rural counties will likely be faced with a shortage of lawyers as aging lawyers retire.”)