

DATE: May 19, 2025
TO: Joint Standing Committee on Judiciary
FROM: Sam Warren, UMS Chief External & Governmental Affairs Officer
RE: **LD 1965, Resolve, to Establish a Task Force to Create a Court Navigation Program Plan**

Senator Carney, Representative Kuhn, and distinguished members of the Joint Standing Committee on Judiciary: I apologize that a Board of Trustees meeting at the University of Maine at Presque Isle prevents me from joining you in person today. I write on behalf of the University of Maine System, which includes the University of Maine School of Law (Maine Law), to convey our willingness to convene the task force that would be established by the bipartisan LD 1965, *Resolve, to Establish a Task Force to Create a Court Navigation Program Plan*.

With the state's only and public law school and as Maine's leading provider of behavioral health professionals, our System is well-positioned to lead this important work to develop a court navigation program plan. While we recognize the work detailed in the bill is significant, consistent with our public service commitment, our System is prepared to undertake this accelerated planning process within existing resources and looks forward to collaborating with the organizations detailed in Sec. 1.

While you heard from President/Dean Leigh Saufley in January, this is the first legislation focused on our law school to come to the Judiciary Committee this session, and I would like to use this opportunity to share an update about Maine Law with you.

As some members of this Committee will remember, Maine Law was on the verge of closure just five years ago, potentially making our state one of just two in the nation without a law school. System and State leaders agreed they could not let that happen and have made significant structural changes and investments in the intervening years to create a vibrant law school for all of Maine.

This past fall, Maine Law welcomed its largest incoming class since at least 2008 and with 270 total students, we are currently enjoying our highest enrollment in more than a decade. About half of the school's students come from outside of Maine, yet the overwhelming majority will stay in the state to practice after graduation. Their debt load is the lowest of their New England peers, and their first-time bar passage rate is now 89%, the highest among New England peers. Applications to join Maine Law this coming fall are up 60% over last year.

Just last month, Maine Law was recognized by U.S. News & World Report as one of the nation's top law schools, marking the first time since 2010 we have been in the top 100. In addition to its overall score and consistent with the state's needs, we are incredibly proud that Maine Law was ranked No. 14 for sending graduates into Public Service Law. As you know, through the Clinics at Maine Law, each year our student attorneys provide more than 17,000 hours in pro bono legal aid in the state. And this weekend, amid our state's urgent need for more highly qualified attorneys, Maine Law will confer 88 J.D. degrees, the most in at least a decade.

Ongoing and increased investment — including appropriations for UMS at or above the levels provided in Governor Mills' original FY26-27 biennial budget proposal and endorsed by a bipartisan majority of the Education & Cultural Affairs Committee — is critically necessary to further sustain and strengthen Maine Law's existing academic and clinic programs and enable us to take on other public service like that proposed by LD 1965.

Thank you for the opportunity to provide this testimony.