



IMMIGRANT LEGAL ADVOCACY PROJECT

**Testimony of Susan Roche, Executive Director
of the Immigrant Legal Advocacy Project
in Support of Supplemental Budget Funding for Civil Legal Aid**

Senator Rotundo, Representative Gattine, and members of the Appropriations and Financial Affairs Committee; Senator Carney, Representative Kuhn, and members of the Judiciary Committee.

My name is Susan Roche, and I am the Executive Director of the Immigrant Legal Advocacy Project (ILAP). I am submitting this testimony to strongly support the inclusion of \$3 million in the FY 2026-27 supplemental budget to sustain Maine's civil legal aid network through the Maine Civil Legal Services Fund (MCLSF). ILAP is one of the seven civil legal aid organizations that receives funding from MCLSF.

ILAP is Maine's only statewide immigration legal services organization. Founded in 1993, ILAP's mission is to advance justice for Maine's immigrants through free immigration legal services, community outreach, and advocacy.

ILAP serves over 5,000 clients each year in all 16 of Maine's counties. We reach communities statewide through legal clinics, education and outreach, virtual legal services, "self-help" materials, statewide advocacy, and partnerships that extend our reach across the state. We provide free, specialized immigration legal representation to individuals and families in Maine with a focus on humanitarian cases and cases involving detention and removal. During the past year our work in detention and removal, and now federal habeas work, has expanded significantly.

Last year's one-time investment in civil legal aid provided ILAP with the ability to expand our capacity to help more immigrants in Maine at a time when draconian federal immigration policies and enhanced detention and enforcement operations have had a devastating impact on immigrants in Maine and significantly increased the complexity of our work.

Having an immigration lawyer can be the difference between having legal status in the U.S. and being deported back to a country where you face persecution and family separation. Statistics show that someone is five times more likely to win their case in immigration court if they have a lawyer. ILAP maintains a success rate of over 95% for cases reaching a final decision.

In this time of heightened immigration enforcement, legal representation is even more critical in an immigration case, as many people are being detained who have pending legal immigration applications, work authorization, and no criminal history. They are quickly transferred out of state, held under horrible conditions in detention facilities, and denied a hearing or coerced

into signing away their right to a hearing. Without rapid legal intervention they are extremely unlikely to get released from jail or to be given the right to proceed with their legal immigration case before getting deported, possibly to a third country where they have no connection or legal status.

Most recently, during “Operation Catch of the Day” ILAP expanded its habeas work and worked in collaboration with partners including the Refugee and Human Rights Clinic at the University of Maine School of Law to develop a rapid emergency response plan. During the four-day operation, ICE detained over 200 immigrants in Maine, and most of them had pending immigration applications and no criminal history. ILAP received requests for help from about 70 individuals, and we filed 17 habeas petitions. Of those cases, most individuals have already been released because of our legal advocacy.

One client from the operation was deaf and spoke an uncommon form of sign language and was unable to communicate with ICE or understand what was happening. Another client was a father whose baby was in the NICU and whose wife was home recovering from surgery after childbirth. Both clients had pending immigration applications, work authorization, and no criminal history. They were both released but would likely have been deported without legal representation.

Although Operation Catch of the Day has ended, enhanced ICE enforcement and raids continue. We have continued the work of our emergency legal response as more individuals have been detained over the past couple of weeks and we are working on plans for a more sustainable project, which will require increased staffing and capacity.

Immigration enforcement has had a chilling effect on communities, as many immigrant families, including those with naturalized US citizens and legal permanent residents, are afraid to leave their homes, send their children to school, go to the doctor, or call the police for help when they are the victim of a crime. The ICE operation has had a ripple effect impacting other areas of civil legal aid as many are now facing eviction, losing their jobs, and much more.

Funding from the MCLSF was critical in helping ILAP increase staffing and capacity to respond to the increased demand for our services resulting from new immigration policies and enforcement. For ILAP, the MCLSF is our only form of recurring government funding. We are ineligible for most federal funding because of the clients we serve. So, we rely upon private donors and funders for most of our support, and that funding is subject to shifting priorities and changing donor interests.

Losing the MCLSF funding could not come at a worse time, when immigrant communities in Maine and throughout the country are the target of a mass deportation and detention campaign, when lawful paths to legal status are being eliminated, and when due process and the rule of law are being eroded. Decreased funding would lead to fewer attorneys on ILAP’s staff to represent vulnerable Mainers who are caught up in ICE enforcement and detention.

As more immigrants with lawful work authorization are detained, transferred out of state, and deported, this will have a devastating impact on Maine's communities, workforce, and economy. Investing in civil legal aid is an investment in Maine and our communities.

I respectfully urge the Legislature to include \$3 million in the FY 2026-27 supplemental budget to sustain Maine's civil legal aid network and preserve access to justice for low-income Mainers.

Thank you for your consideration.

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