

Testimony of Krystal Williams On Behalf of Alpha Legal Foundation

Senator, Representative, and distinguished members of the Committee:

My name is Krystal Williams. I live in Portland, and I am an attorney, law firm owner, and Katahdin Counsel member, having provided more than 50 hours of documented pro bono representation to indigent Mainers last year. I am also the founder of Alpha Legal Foundation, and I submit this testimony on its behalf.

I respectfully urge you to include \$3 million in the FY 2026–27 Supplemental Budget, in addition to the \$1.3 million baseline for the Maine Civil Legal Services Fund, to sustain civil legal aid in the second year of the biennium.

Across Maine, a growing number of individuals are navigating the civil court system without representation. In response to what we were seeing on the ground, Alpha Legal Foundation launched a legal access navigator Program in 2025. Through this initiative, we recruit and train non-lawyers interested in pursuing legal careers. Our navigators provide neutral, accurate education about court processes and assist self-represented litigants in completing court forms correctly. Navigators do not provide legal advice. They help individuals understand procedural requirements, organize documentation, and avoid preventable errors that can delay or derail a case.

This work has given us a clear, real-time view of the justice gap.

We routinely encounter:

- individuals who do not understand notice requirements or filing deadlines,
- individuals with limited literacy attempting to complete protection-from-abuse petitions, and
- moderate-income Mainers who earn too much to qualify for free services but cannot afford private counsel and are overwhelmed by basic family court forms.

In each of these situations, the absence of legal support significantly increases the likelihood of an adverse outcome. Education and form assistance can stabilize the process, but they cannot replace the judgment, advocacy, and strategic counsel that licensed attorneys provide, particularly for complex matters.

Our navigators regularly refer individuals to civil legal aid providers. Those providers are already operating at or beyond capacity. The volume of referrals alone demonstrates that demand for representation substantially exceeds available resources. What we are witnessing is not a lack of effort; it is a lack of sufficient infrastructure.

Civil legal aid is core public infrastructure. It prevents unlawful evictions and foreclosures, stabilizes families during crisis, secures access to health care and income supports, protects survivors of violence, and safeguards the rights of children and vulnerable adults. It reduces downstream costs in emergency shelter, health care, and other publicly funded systems.

Without the additional \$3 million investment, providers will be forced to reduce services next year. That will mean fewer attorneys available to represent Mainers facing eviction, loss of benefits, or family instability at a time when federal protections and administrative systems are becoming increasingly complex.

Our on-the-ground experience confirms what the data has long shown: the need is substantial, urgent, and growing. Form assistance can help someone enter the courthouse. Only adequately funded civil legal aid ensures they can meaningfully access justice once they are there.

I respectfully urge you to include the requested \$3 million in the Supplemental Budget and sustain this essential investment in Maine's legal infrastructure.

Thank you for your time and your continued commitment to Maine's communities.

Krystal Williams, Esq.

Alpha Legal Foundation

Portland, Maine