

Testimony in Support of LD LD 2212

Supplemental Budget Funding for Civil Legal Aid

Sponsor: Representative Gattine

Public Hearing: Joint Standing Committee on Appropriations and Financial Affairs and Judiciary, February 27th, 2026, 10:00 AM

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

My name is Ruben Torres, and I serve as the Advocacy, Communications, and Policy Manager for the Maine Immigrants' Rights Coalition (MIRC). MIRC is a network of more than 100 organizations across the state working collaboratively to advance the rights and well-being of Maine's immigrant and refugee communities. We submit this testimony in strong support of including \$3 million in the FY 2026–27 supplemental budget to sustain Maine's civil legal aid network.

Access to civil legal assistance is essential for stability. When families are able to resolve housing disputes, secure work authorization, or protect themselves from exploitation promptly, they are less likely to rely on emergency shelter, General Assistance, or crisis health systems. In this sense, civil legal aid functions as a cost-avoidance mechanism that supports the very systems funded in this supplemental budget. Civil legal services play an indispensable role in maintaining a just and equitable society, particularly for low-income Mainers, new arrivals, and communities navigating complex legal systems and government processes.

Every day, our coalition members encounter individuals and families facing legal challenges with life-altering consequences, including housing instability, domestic violence, wage theft, family reunification challenges, and immigration-related legal matters. Even when laws are intended to protect people, those protections are often out of reach without access to legal assistance. Civil legal aid providers help ensure that individuals and families are not left to navigate complicated and often intimidating systems on their own.

The need for legal assistance is especially acute in immigrant and refugee communities. Many immigrants must navigate multiple legal and administrative systems at once, often in a language other than their own and without the benefit of legal representation. In immigration proceedings in particular, there is generally no right to a court-appointed attorney, even when the consequences may be severe.

Recent immigration enforcement activity in Maine has highlighted the importance of access to legal assistance. In recent months, increased immigration enforcement activity in Maine has heightened uncertainty within immigrant communities. During periods of intensified enforcement, individuals often need immediate legal guidance to understand their rights, protect their lawful status, and ensure due process. Without timely legal intervention, families

can experience prolonged instability that affects housing, employment, and access to essential services.

These operations have created widespread fear and uncertainty among immigrant families, with many individuals unsure of their rights or how to respond to enforcement actions. Civil legal aid providers play a critical role in helping individuals understand their rights, access representation, and navigate complex legal proceedings during times of heightened enforcement.

There have been reports of lawful residents and individuals with strong community ties being detained during enforcement operations, underscoring the importance of access to legal counsel and due process protections. Legal assistance is often the only way individuals can challenge wrongful detentions or protect their rights.

For immigrant and refugee families, timely legal representation often determines whether a household can remain housed, maintain employment, or reunify safely with family members. Delays or lack of representation can extend shelter stays, interrupt employment, and increase reliance on public assistance. Sustained funding for civil legal aid therefore strengthens the broader safety net by reducing downstream costs and promoting economic self-sufficiency.

The Legislature's investment in civil legal aid in the first year of the biennium strengthened access to justice for many Maine residents, including immigrant and refugee families. Sustaining that investment will help ensure that these services remain available across the state.

Including \$3 million in the FY 2026–27 supplemental budget will help preserve access to justice while reinforcing the stability of Maine's housing, workforce, and safety net systems. At a time of heightened federal uncertainty, this investment strengthens Maine's capacity to ensure that all residents can participate fully in our communities and economy. We respectfully urge the Committees to sustain this funding.

The Maine Immigrants' Rights Coalition urges your support for LD 2212. Thank you for your leadership and your commitment to justice for all.

Sincerely,
Ruben Torres
Advocacy, Communications, and Policy Manager
Maine Immigrants' Rights Coalition