



PINE TREE LEGAL ASSISTANCE, INC.

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Testimony of Tom Fritzsche on behalf of Pine Tree Legal Assistance before the Joint Standing Committee on Judiciary and the Appropriations and Financial Affairs Committee

In Support of Amending LD 2212 to Prevent Reductions in Legal Services to People with Low Incomes and to Protect Services for Survivors of Sexual Assault and Domestic Violence

February 27, 2026

Good afternoon, Senators Rotundo and Carney, Representatives Gattine and Kuhn, and esteemed members of the Appropriations and Financial Affairs Committee and esteemed members of the Joint Standing Committee on Judiciary.

My name is Tom Fritzsche, and I am the Executive Director of Pine Tree Legal Assistance. Pine Tree Legal Assistance strongly supports the amendment of LD 2212 to prevent a reduction of \$3 million in the critical funding to the Maine Civil Legal Services Fund (MCLSF) that allows Pine Tree Legal Assistance and six other non-profit service organizations to provide access to justice to low-income Mainers. Pine Tree Legal Assistance further supports making previously appropriated funds to support legal and advocacy services provided to survivors of domestic violence and sexual assault ongoing.

Pine Tree Legal Assistance opened its doors in the summer of 1967 and has six offices throughout the state, in Presque Isle, Machias, Bangor, Augusta, Lewiston and Portland. Our staff handle cases in all 16 counties, in all 26 district courts, and in the tribal courts of the Passamaquoddy Tribe and Penobscot Nation. We are Maine's largest non-profit provider of legal services, and for many Mainers needing legal help for housing stability, protection from abuse or harassment, consumer rights, and many other basic needs, Pine Tree is their first and last resort. We represent low-income Mainers statewide with no fees to our clients.

If the \$3 million in one-time funding appropriated in 2025 expires in June 2026, as it is currently on track to do, the seven service providers are likely to serve a total of at least 5,000 fewer clients next year than we did last year. The impact will last beyond 2026 and 2027; the outreach and referral networks, trained attorney and paralegal staff, and other infrastructure are harder to recreate once they go away than they are to sustain. More importantly, families with children will be evicted without counsel and will face greater, and longer-lasting, disruption to the stability of their housing, education, and access to employment and medical care. Survivors of domestic violence and sexual assault who do not have legal representation will be more likely to

be stuck in abusive relationships. Low-income consumers and homeowners will be more likely to lose their homes and funds and will face future poverty that could have been prevented by our state's laws, if all had equal access to justice. The consequences of unequal access to justice will stay with people and communities for years to come.

To illustrate what is possible with funding to the Maine Civil Legal Services Fund and other sources of support, I include below data regarding Pine Tree Legal Assistance's Services and Impact during 2025. Additional details are available in our full report to the Maine Civil Legal Services Fund Commission, available on the website of the Joint Standing Committee on Judiciary.

Just in 2025, Pine Tree Legal Assistance worked on a total of 7,858 cases. Pine Tree reached more than 27,000 people in 2025 through our direct legal services and outreach. This included 18,157 people served through individual cases, including 6,311 children, and 9,013 people served through community education activities including consultations, meetings, presentations, and trainings.

MCLSF funding is crucial for the maintenance and development of website resources and self-help tools. Pine Tree maintains three websites: ptla.org, kidslegal.org, and statesidelegal.org. All three websites are freely available to any individual and remain an important way of increasing access to the justice system, especially for unrepresented individuals. Pine Tree's websites are nationally recognized for their accessibility and successful provision of tools for unrepresented people to navigate the legal system when they need to do so. In 2025, Pine Tree's websites were utilized by 2,047,482 unique users in 2025, accessing Pine Tree's websites for a total of 2,691,154 page views. These statistics include users who accessed our chatbot in 2025. Ptla.org alone recorded 1,773,645 users and 2,170,277 page views.

The following data highlights some of Pine Tree's most significant outcomes. In 2025, Pine Tree's advocacy:

- Resulted in \$4,176,970 in income, savings, and benefits to our clients.
- Prevented homelessness for 2,060 households by preventing or delaying an eviction.
- Preserved housing subsidies for eligible tenant families worth more than \$225,000 annually.
- Secured more than 368 new or extended protection orders for victims of domestic violence, sexual assault, stalking, and dating violence.

The data collected on outcomes provides only a glimpse into the impact of Pine Tree's advocacy. Further, despite our best efforts, we are not able to serve all of the people who contact us looking for legal services. In 2025, Pine Tree Legal Assistance recorded 10,282 requests for legal help. Just under 65% of the requests for assistance resulted in a new case. The remaining 36% were addressed with general legal information and/or referrals to other resources. It would be an enormous setback to see the latter number increase in the coming year if MCLSF funding drops off after June 30.

One of the areas of our work at greatest risk due to funding reductions is our focus on services in rural Maine. For example, Aroostook and Washington counties make up one-third of the entire state of Maine but have fewer than 100 working attorneys – less than 3 percent of all working attorneys in Maine. While these counties may have low population densities, their need for legal assistance remains high. A 2022 national survey conducted by the Legal Services Corporation found that 77 percent of low-income rural households experienced at least one civil legal problem in the previous year. Despite the great need for legal aid in Maine’s rural regions, recruiting and retaining attorneys in these remote areas has proven challenging. Pine Tree Legal Assistance has invested MCLSF resources into staffing our Machias and Presque Isle offices with newer attorneys, with positive early returns that will be impossible to sustain without ongoing MCLSF support.

Pine Tree Legal Assistance also supports making funding previously appropriated to support the work of advocates and staff at Maine’s sexual assault support centers and children’s advocacy centers ongoing, to help those staff continue their badly needed work, which also often makes legal services to those clients that PTLA staff provide more effective. Pine Tree Legal Assistance further supports making funding previously appropriated to support services partially funded by the federal Victims of Crime Act, some of which is one-time and will expire in 2027, ongoing, in order to ensure that legal and advocacy services are sustained well into the future.

Thank you for your time and for your dedication to the people of Maine. Please do not hesitate to contact me with any questions.