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United Way
of Greater Portland



Good afternoon, Senator Carney and members of the Judiciary Committee.

My name is Terence Miller, and I am the Advocacy Director for Preble Street. I am here today to request your support in the passage of LD564: An Act to Improve Access to Civil Legal Services.

Across the state of Maine, 26.7% of people are considered low-income—living at or below 200% of the Federal Poverty Line. At Preble Street, we serve many of the most vulnerable folks in our SiteBased Housing First, shelter, Food Security Hub, anti-trafficking services, and Veterans Housing programs. Many people we serve frequently face civil legal issues that require legal advice or formal representation to seek resolution.

Our civil legal aid service options in Maine are numerous yet severely underfunded. Presently, the Volunteer Legal Project identifies rotating volunteer law firms offering legal advice through the Maine Homeless Legal Project. However, due to funding restrictions, it is limited to legal advice and not a representation of clients. While we rely on other civil legal providers such as Maine Equal Justice and Pine Tree Legal, underfunding these terrific legal providers creates gaps in Maine's funding of indigent legal services, and most people's needs are not being comprehensively met. LD564 will bolster the funding for Civil Legal Services across the state, expanding the delivery of services to individuals and families in need. We need sustained funding through ongoing appropriations to strengthen this service—not piecemeal aid.

The depth of the statewide housing crisis and the need for robust civil legal representation is never more apparent than in our work with clients trying to maintain stable housing. In the Preble Street Rapid Re-Housing and Veterans Housing programs, individuals frequently face challenges from landlords refusing to accept subsidized rental payments, including those from General Assistance, and property managers issuing notices to quit with little cause. With assistance and representation from Pine Tree Legal Aid, clients benefit from legal advocacy that can stave off crises. Clients have had their evictions stalled, with 30-day notices extended to 90 days, allowing them to prepare for shifts in their living situation adequately. In other instances, legal representation has offered important clarification on the rights of landlords vs. tenants, allowing clients to seek the best path forward to maintaining their housing.

With an awareness that housing is one of the central pathways to general stability, our ability to keep clients housed is paramount. Yet the provision of these critical services has clear limitations, which can be traced back to shortcomings in the revenue stream. Legal representation should not be a privilege amongst the most vulnerable but a basic resource that is accessible to all.

At Preble Street, we recognize that we work within a socioeconomic and justice system structure that often perpetuates cycles of poverty and harm. Quality civic legal representation can be a lifeline that offers individuals a chance to extract themselves from these cycles.