



PINE TREE LEGAL ASSISTANCE, INC.

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Good afternoon, Senator Carney, Representative Moonen, and members of the Judiciary Committee. My name is Russell Anderson, and I grew up and have lived in Waldoboro, Maine for most of my life. I have served on the Board of Directors of Pine Tree Legal Assistance since 1996 and I currently serve as the Secretary. I am here today to express my support of LD 564, An Act to Improve Access to Legal Services.

I didn't aim to live this life as a victim or to be a poster child for valor over poverty. I've done well to survive, but I've needed help along the way and I don't think that is a problem as long as I can give something back. We may not have much cash, but we do value our dignity and worth in life.

Our country's founders promised to "establish justice" for all of us and I believe in that promise. We can't let it become a commodity that some people have and other people don't have. But when you don't know how the law works, you are totally lost in the dark. The mechanisms of the legal system require debate, and that means that people like me need someone else to articulate their rights. If you don't get that help and are left without hope, that's not good for you or society. It can start someone down a path that leads to despair and really serious problems for themselves and their family. And this can snowball and affect the whole community in really negative ways.

I know Pine Tree works hard to reach as many people as possible with its limited staff. They even make themselves available to pick up clients on the day of the final hearing, people that didn't know legal help was available. Their services save people's homes, protect them from abuse, keep them in school, and enforce legal protections against unfair debt collection, housing discrimination, and a host of other bad actions. Both as a member of the Pine Tree Board and as a client, I've seen access to legal services solve problems that would otherwise hurt both sides, and do it in a way that saves money and time for everyone, including the Courts.

What I admire about Pine Tree is the fact that their staff have the time and patience to listen, to look me in the eye, to ask questions and verify the answers, and then to give me the best advice based on their deep understanding and knowledge of the law. Picking up the phone and being told that you can get help can change your life.

Right now, Pine Tree is turning away 3 – 4 clients for every one person whose case they can accept. This proposed level of funding would make their services (and those of other free legal aid programs) more available to clients throughout Maine, and that would be a game changer for our state. I hope you will unanimously support this bill and work with your colleagues and the Governor to ensure that it is signed into law.

Respectfully,

Russell Anderson



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