

March 21, 2023

TESTIMONY IN SUPPORT OF LD 564

Good afternoon, Senator Carney, Representative Moonen, and members of the Judiciary Committee. My name is Christopher Northrop and I'm from Sanford. I am a professor on the faculty of the University of Maine School of Law, and the Founding Director of Maine Law's Juvenile Justice (now Youth Justice) Clinic. I also co-direct the Cumberland Legal Aid Clinic. I am here to support LD 564 – An Act to Improve Access to Civil Legal Services.

Our name, the Cumberland Legal Aid Clinic is a relic. This name reflects our origins but certainly not the geographic scope of our work. Indeed, our impact is statewide. Our clinical programs provide full representation in counties outside of Southern Maine for high priority cases. We also provide extensive limited representation and advisory work statewide. And, as of January 1st, we conduct full representation work for low-income Mainers living in the St. John River Valley, through in our Rural Practice Clinic in Fort Kent. Let me offer a huge thank you to the legislature and the Attorney General for getting that program up and running. This is a pilot project that is a collaboration between the law school and UM Fort Kent that was 10 years in the making. We hope that it can become a permanent addition to our clinical programs.

Our hope is that you look at the Clinic's work as an investment. Our mission is two-fold: educating Maine Law students who comprise the future generation of Maine lawyers through an intense clinical and mentoring experience while providing high-quality pro bono legal services to hundreds of indigent Maine residents. The Clinic has six separate programs, through which 40-50 law students assist low-income Mainers every year. This accounts for over 14,000 hours of pro bono work annually. Over half of our graduates spend at least one semester doing clinical work. The financial support of LD 564 not only helps low-income Mainers out today, but the training provided to our students will pay dividends throughout their careers.

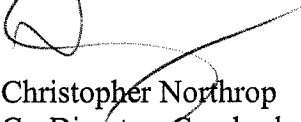
We have received funding through the MCLSF each year, and the Fund is a critical source of external support for all of the Clinic's programs. This support directly enhances our Clinic's mission to create a multiplier effect through the training of a significant cohort of new lawyers in Maine's strong pro bono tradition. Participating in the Clinic also prepares Maine Law students for small firm practice in rural communities. This remains an important part of our mission, and recent Clinic alumni use their training to embark on rural practice, whether in firms or public sector positions, in all parts of the state.

LD 564 will help us continue and expand our Rural Practice Clinic. It will also shore up our ability to maintain and enhance our current level of services across all of our clinics. Many of our core programs, such as our Protection from Abuse Project in Lewiston District Court, are funded almost entirely by grants and other external funding. Our student attorneys help more than 200 survivors of domestic violence and sexual assault each year navigate the legal system to find safety and security for themselves and their children. This legislation helps secure our ability to continue this important work.

LD 564 helps ensure that Maine can make justice accessible to everyone, regardless of income. This legislature has taken great strides to shore up our criminal defense system. I am here to ask that you increase your support to the dedicated group of organizations and lawyers that advocate for and protect the interests of all low-income Mainers.

Thank you.

Regards,



Christopher Northrop
Co-Director, Cumberland Legal Aid Clinic
University of Maine School of Law