



March 21, 2023

Senator Anne Carney, Chair
Representative Matt Moonen, Chair
Committee on Judiciary
State House, Room 438

Re: L.D. 564, *An Act to Improve Access to Civil Legal Services*

Dear Senator Carney, Representative Moonen, and Members of the Committee on Judiciary:

My name is Atlee Reilly and I serve as the Legal Director of Disability Rights Maine (DRM), Maine's Protection and Advocacy agency for people with disabilities. DRM's mission is to advance justice and equality by enforcing rights and expanding opportunities for people with disabilities in Maine. In 2022, DRM provided no cost legal services to Mainers with disabilities in all sixteen of Maine's counties. I am here today to testify in support of LD 564, *An Act to Improve Access to Civil Legal Services*, which would build upon previous efforts toward ensuring Maine makes a sustained and adequate investment in civil legal aid.

DRM has received funding through the Maine Civil Legal Services Fund to support the provision of legal services to people with disabilities for many years, and received 3% of the allocation in 2022. To date, this funding has not been sufficient to fully support a staff attorney position. As a result, DRM uses the MCLSF allocation to supplement our existing funding to provide representation in cases where the client has a disability, has an income below or around the federal poverty level, and has experienced disability-based discrimination or a violation of their rights.

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Almost 16% of people in Maine are people with disabilities, which is above the national average of 12.6%. And unfortunately, disability and poverty remain closely linked. Between 2015-2019, 56% of working-age Mainers with a disability lived in or near poverty, which was more than twice the rate for Mainers without a disability. Given the significant need for no-cost civil legal services within the disability community, MCLSF funding is essential to maintaining and expanding DRM's capacity to provide legal representation to Mainers with disabilities.

The Maine Civil Legal Services Fund Commission recently provided a report to this Committee which contains detailed information about DRM's activities in 2022.¹ So I will just take this opportunity to highlight some information from the unmet needs section of that report. We have continued to see a growing demand for education related legal advocacy. DRM prioritizes cases where students are excluded from school for all or part of their school day and, at this time, there is such significant demand for representation in those situations that they comprise the vast majority of our education docket. We have also seen a significant increase in the number of calls related to housing and an increasing number of Mainers with disabilities at risk of losing their housing.

We have tried to meet this demand within existing resources, but need to hire additional attorneys to sustain and expand efforts in these areas. LD 564 would help DRM expand capacity to work toward meeting these unmet needs and we ask you to vote ought to pass on this important initiative.

Respectfully,

Atlee Reilly
Legal Director
Disability Rights Maine

¹ Maine Civil Legal Services Fund Commission, *Report to the Joint Standing Committee on the Judiciary, 131st Legislature, First Regular Session, (February 8, 2023)*. Available at: <https://legislature.maine.gov/doc/9722>