



IMMIGRANT LEGAL ADVOCACY PROJECT

March 21, 2023

**Testimony of Susan Roche, Executive Director of the Immigrant Legal Advocacy Project
in Support of An Act to Improve Access to Civil Legal Services LD 564**

Senator Carney, Representative Moonen, and esteemed members of the Judiciary Committee.

My name is Susan Roche, and I am the Executive Director of the Immigrant Legal Advocacy Project (ILAP). ILAP is Maine's only state-wide immigration legal aid organization. We have full-time offices in Portland and Lewiston and a regular presence across the state through our Rural Maine Project.

I am here to testify in support of LD 564, an Act to Improve Access to Civil Legal Aid. ILAP is one of the seven organizations that would benefit from this funding to help low-income Mainers navigate our civil legal systems when they face life changing problems.

ILAP's mission is to help immigrants and asylum seekers gain work authorization and legal status, which are the first steps towards meeting basic needs, joining the workforce, and integrating safely into Maine communities.

Statistics show that someone is five times more likely to win their case in immigration court if they have a lawyer. ILAP maintains a success rate of over 95% for cases reaching a final decision.

Each year, our staff and volunteers help more than 3,000 clients from all 16 counties. Our clients include asylum seekers, young people who qualify for Special Immigrant Juvenile Status, immigrant victims of domestic violence and trafficking, and more. In addition to our legal staff, we have more than 200 *pro bono* attorneys who donate over 5,000 hours of their time each year representing clients through our Asylum Program and our Immigrant Children's Project. Unfortunately, we still have to turn away hundreds of clients each year because we lack the capacity to serve them.

For ILAP, the Maine Civil Legal Services Fund (MCLSF) is our only form of recurring government funding. We are ineligible for most federal funding because of the clients we serve. So, we rely upon private donors and funders for most of our support, and that funding is subject to shifting priorities and changing donor interests.

Increased funding would allow ILAP to expand our Asylum Assistance and Legal Orientation Project, an innovative project we launched last fall in response to the large number of asylum seekers arriving in Maine and staying in hotels. Although the gold standard is to provide full representation to anyone applying for asylum in immigration court, the demand now far exceeds

our capacity. This new project will help more asylum seekers file their asylum applications on their own, with legal guidance from attorneys. The goals are (1) to help asylum seekers get their applications filed so they can get work authorization, and (2) to ensure their cases are properly screened, prepared, and set up for ultimate success so they will eventually have permanent legal status. Once an asylum applicant can work, they may eventually hire their own lawyer or get placed with an ILAP attorney if we have the capacity to represent them at that time.

Increased funding would also help us represent more children through our Immigrant Children's Project. We launched this project in the fall of 2020 to build a statewide system to identify children and youth who may be eligible for Special Immigrant Juvenile Status (SIJS) and to pair them with legal representation by ILAP staff and *pro bono* attorneys. Two years later, we have made significant progress toward these goals, serving more than 200 young people last year. But we are still turning away dozens of qualifying children on our waitlist because of our limited resources.

We know that Maine needs immigrants to help grow our workforce and economy. As we welcome new immigrants and asylum seekers into the state, the need for ILAP services will continue to grow. I ask that you vote to support LD 564 to invest in ILAP and civil legal aid in Maine.