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Testimony of Tom Fritzsche Pine Tree Legal Assistance to the Joint Standing Committee on Judiciary

In Support of LD 2084 An Act to Provide Funding for Essential Services for Victims of Crimes

Date of Public Hearing: January 23, 2024

Good afternoon, Senator Carney, Representative Moonen, and esteemed members of the Joint Standing Committee on Judiciary.

My name is Tom Fritzsche, and I am the Executive Director of Pine Tree Legal Assistance. Pine Tree is a nonprofit organization with offices in Presque Isle, Machias, Bangor, Augusta, Lewiston, and Portland. Since 1967, Pine Tree Legal Assistance has provided free legal services to low-income people throughout the State of Maine. Our staff handle cases in all 16 counties, in all district courts, and in the courts of the Passamaquoddy Tribe and Penobscot Nation.

In 2023, Pine Tree Legal Assistance worked on a total of 7,545 cases. We served 18,342 people through individual cases, including 6,900 children. Pine Tree served an additional 8,369 people through community education activities including consultations, meetings, presentations, and trainings.

To make the most of our limited resources, Pine Tree prioritizes services to individuals and families with a household annual adjusted gross income that is at or below 125% of the federal poverty guidelines, which were, for reference, \$24,650 for a household of two in 2023. Pine Tree provides services in most major types of civil legal issues, including consumer protection, housing, tax law, employment, veterans' issues, access to education, health, income maintenance, and family law and victim rights.

Civil Legal Representation for Survivors

Attorneys in Pine Tree's statewide Family Law and Victim Rights unit represent survivors of domestic violence, sexual assault, and stalking. In 2023, we handled **1,369 civil legal cases for survivors**. This is over 18% of Pine Tree's total cases for 2023. About half of our work in the Family Law and Victim Rights Unit is supported by VOCA (Victims of Crime Act) funds.

Pine Tree has been receiving VOCA funds since 2015. We began with a pilot project based in our Lewiston office, prioritizing civil legal cases for non-offending parents and caretakers of child victims of sexual assault who were interviewed at the local Child Advocacy Center. In January of 2017, Pine Tree launched a VOCA funded expansion of our existing legal services for survivors, which allowed us for the first time to **provide legal representation for survivors in**

every courthouse in the state, including rural courts such as Machias, Calais, Farmington, South Paris, Rockland, and Houlton. Using VOCA funding we are also able to **help the families of child victims**, something most of our other grants prohibit us from doing.

As is the case with other civil legal issues, survivors have no right to court-appointed counsel to assess their individual cases, and although the people we help are victims of crime, they often turn to the civil legal system to address their needs for safety, to seek justice, and to protect their children. Pine Tree represents people in Protection from Abuse, family matters like divorce and parental rights, and Title IX cases.

Having legal representation makes a difference in the outcome of civil legal cases. In one study, 83% of victims represented by an attorney successfully obtained a protective order, as compared to just 32% of victims without an attorney.¹

Protecting people from ongoing harm is also a good investment and can prevent further costs, both the immeasurable harms of fear and pain, but also monetary harm. According to a 2018 medical study, the estimated intimate partner violence lifetime cost was \$103,767 per female victim and \$23,414 per male victim.² This includes medical costs, lost productivity, property loss, and more. The study found that about 37% of the lifetime costs were paid by government sources.

Maine's Network of Victim Services Resources

Pine Tree Legal's services exist as part of the network of resources available to survivors throughout the state. We receive referrals directly from the child advocacy centers, domestic violence resource centers, and sexual assault support centers. We work closely with all the other VOCA-funded providers to form an effective and efficient set of resources, connected in a way that best supports survivors and allows us each to play a unique role. We are here in front of you today together because each of these pieces forms a crucial part of the essential services that support victims. The Lewiston tragedy gave us a poignant example of the ways VOCA-funded agencies work together, responding quickly and efficiently to the crisis in the hours and days after the shooting. **Victim services is a great example of a Maine system that is working, and working well- but it will not survive a cut of this magnitude, and the network that has been so carefully built will take years to re-establish.**

This network extends to other legal services, both those we offer internally at Pine Tree Legal as well as the other civil legal services for low-income people in Maine. Pine Tree and Legal Services for the Elderly are two organizations that provide VOCA-funded services as well as other general civil legal services funded, among other ways, through the Maine Civil Legal Services Fund. The one-time appropriation to augment the Maine Civil Legal Services Fund in 2024 will be helpful to us and our other civil legal aid partners, but without ongoing stability in

¹ Jane Murphy, Engaging with the State: The Growing Reliance on Lawyers and Judges to Protect Battered Women, 11 Am. U. J. Gender Soc. Pol'y & L. 499, 511-12 (2003).

² Cora Peterson, et al, Lifetime Economic Burden of Intimate Partner Violence Among U.S. Adults, 55 Am. J. Prev. Med. 433 (Oct. 2018), available at <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC6161830/>.

the full group of VOCA grantees, Pine Tree will be less effective not only in our VOCA-funded services but across all our work, which is interconnected.

VOCA-funded services are a critical part of what we do. Our next witness is one of the people who helped bring together the best parts of the system we have now to provide access to justice for survivors. Lucia Chomeau Hunt is Pine Tree's directing attorney of Family Law and Victim Rights and will share more about how these services work, their impact, and what makes them so effective for community safety.

Thank you for your time and attention. I am happy to answer any questions.