



## PINE TREE LEGAL ASSISTANCE, INC.

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<https://ptla.org>

Testimony of Cailley E. Bonti, Esq.  
For Pine Tree Legal Assistance, Inc.

In support of LD 1877 “An Act to Reduce the Number of Children Living in Deep Poverty in  
Maine”

February 1, 2024

Good afternoon, Senator Baldacci, Representative Meyer, and distinguished members of the Health and Human Services Committee. My name is Cailley Bonti. I am a Staff Attorney in the Augusta Office of Pine Tree Legal Assistance. I grew up in the MidCoast, and currently reside in Topsham with my family. I have been at Pine Tree for four years and I have represented tenants in many counties across the state.

Pine Tree Legal provides free civil legal services to low-income Mainers. We opened our doors in the summer of 1967 and have been overwhelmed with people in need of our services ever since. We have six offices throughout the state, from Presque Isle to Portland, and our staff handle cases in all 29 district courts.

In 2023, Pine Tree Legal Assistance worked on 7,545 cases, providing direct legal assistance on a wide range of legal issues. In the years since Covid began, we have seen a significant increase in the need for our services. In 2023, we assisted in more than 300 cases in households that received TANF assistance. We see first-hand in all areas of our practice the poverty that families receiving TANF are living in and the effects in all areas of their lives.

### **TANF Provides Crucial Income for Families**

Pine Tree Legal meets individuals and families across the state every day who are living in deep poverty. Our clients are seeking our help with maintaining their housing, avoiding eviction, and accessing the public benefits assistance they need to survive. The increase in TANF income proposed by LD 1877 could help to mitigate this reality of often impossibly challenging economic circumstances and provide low-income families with a fighting chance to attain economic security.

The families receiving TANF that came to us for help last year were looking for assistance with a wide range of legal issues. Of the few hundred cases, though, the majority were for clients who were either facing housing instability or domestic violence. For families living in deep poverty, not having the income to afford to keep an apartment is a daily reality. From 2019 to 2022, we have seen a 400% increase in the number of calls from tenants about rent increases. This is just one aspect of our clients' lives that has suffered under the current economic turmoil of recent times. Unaffordable rent is impacting Maine renters of all demographics and renters of all



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income levels. We are seeing rent increases for families living in decent, safe apartments and also rent increases in substandard housing.

This past July, the Sun Journal reported that Lewiston and Auburn had a vacancy rate of nearly zero meaning it is essentially impossible to move amongst different housing options because there are no options. The restriction within the rental market is not unique to the Lewiston/Auburn area though – it is a pressure felt statewide even in Maine’s rural communities. Landlords are increasing rents across the board. Other income supports such as vouchers and other forms of subsidized housing are becoming increasingly difficult for renters to take advantage of due to the lack of housing available within the payment standards allowed by HUD and the agencies administering federally subsidized housing.

This bill offers glimmers of hope to help some of the most vulnerable families in Maine be able to maintain stable housing, keep food in the fridge, and send their children to school in clean clothes. This bill is about helping Maine families to access the basic dignity that everyone deserves.

### **Conclusion**

Maine families receiving TANF assistance are among the most vulnerable clients we serve at Pine Tree Legal. This bill could offer hope to families living in poverty that they may have a better chance at attaining basic necessities.

Thank you for the opportunity to provide comments today. I hope you will vote *ought to pass*.