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Senator Rotundo, Senator Carney, Representative Sachs, Representative Moonen, and Members of the Joint Standing Committees on Judiciary and Appropriations and Financial Affairs:

My name is Maureen Boston. I am the Director of Intake at Pine Tree Legal Assistance. I submit testimony today on behalf of Pine Tree in support of increased baseline appropriations for the Maine Civil Legal Services Fund. On a daily basis, Maine's legal aid providers perform essential services for people in crisis by providing advice and representation on an array of legal issues. Our work provides our clients with safety, access to basic necessities, and financial stability, and helps to ensure equitable enforcement of the law. There are many stories and projects that demonstrate the impact of our work. Pine Tree alone served 18,000 people in 2023. Today, I will focus on a subset of legal assistance provided by Maine's legal aid community as an example of the benefits of stable general funding and legal aid structure: disaster legal assistance.

Legal assistance is not the first service people think of in a disaster. However, once the first responder services have been exhausted, the survivors of a disaster are left to attempt to put their lives back together. Many of the issues they face are civil legal issues. Assistance with these issues is valuable to survivors as they try to navigate complicated systems and nuanced laws while they are simultaneously dealing with grief and trauma. Focusing on civil legal needs in the wake of a disaster is a relatively new initiative. In 2018, the federal Legal Services Corporation established a Disaster Task Force to focus on the ways legal aid providers can coordinate with the emergency management community and other service providers to address civil legal needs after a disaster.¹ The Task Force found there are common patterns of civil legal needs that arise from disasters including landlord-tenant and housing, consumer and fraud, income protection, and domestic violence.² The Task Force issued recommendations in their 2019 report to aid legal aid providers and communities in preparing to respond to civil legal needs after a disaster.³ The steps to prepare all rely on their being a strong structure of legal aid services in place in communities prior to a disaster.

Maine's legal aid community most recently saw the need for civil legal assistance after a disaster in the wake of the Lewiston shootings last October. Pine Tree's Executive Director Tom

¹ Legal Services Corporation, *LSC Disaster Task Force Report*, <https://www.lsc.gov/our-impact/publications/other-publications-and-reports/lsc-disaster-task-force-report> (February 27, 2024.)

² Legal Services Corporation, *Report of LSC Disaster Task Force*, <https://lsc-live.app.box.com/s/vro33yjt6nlgurh434fw9jhb7npz4sh>, page 4.

³ Legal Services Corporation, *Report of LSC Disaster Task Force*, <https://lsc-live.app.box.com/s/vro33yjt6nlgurh434fw9jhb7npz4sh>, page 8 et. seq.

Fritzsche and I went to the Family Assistance Center at the Lewiston Armory on the morning of Monday, October 30, 2023 to ensure people knew legal assistance was available. Since that time, Maine's legal aid providers have coordinated services to make sure the Lewiston survivors have access to the information and legal assistance with as few barriers as possible. The Red Cross estimates there are 150 individuals who were affected by the shootings – either present at either location or the family members of victims. All of these 150 people are likely to have civil legal needs: probate and will issues, changes in income and ability to work, rights to accommodations at schools, or questions about how assistance funds like the Lewiston Auburn Response Fund will affect benefits they receive.

I have personally spoken with many of the survivors and provided this assistance. It has been the most humbling experience of my career. The trauma people experienced is deep. Their experience with the shootings has given rise to a myriad of legal issues, all requiring attention to detail and knowledge of systems. These are hard to navigate on a person's best day. It is extremely challenging to keep track of these issues and take steps towards solutions in the context of the ongoing nightmare the Lewiston survivors are living. Examples of some of the issues survivors face are applying for new Social Security benefits, figuring out why a bank would not allow a life insurance check to be deposited, transferring the title of an automobile, and requesting an elementary school provide support for a child who is experiencing trauma. I am grateful, along with my colleagues at Pine Tree and the other legal aid providers, to have the skills and knowledge to provide assistance with those questions and many more. While the cause of our Lewiston client's legal issues was extraordinarily tragic, the work is not different than what the legal aid providers do each day and the needs are the same as the needs of the tens of thousands of other people we serve. There are many aspects of what the survivors of the Lewiston shooting are dealing with that no one has the ability to change. Ensuring civil legal assistance is available to survivors is something that is possible and can help reduce the stress and instability in their lives.

Maine's legal aid providers were able to provide assistance very quickly in Lewiston because of structures already in place. Just like it would be too late to hire a surgeon after a shooting has happened, Maine benefited from the structure of legal aid that already exists. We were able to respond because of hard work and support which created stability in the legal aid community, but our communities' civil legal needs, both those arising out of acute disasters and those that we see every day, still exceed our capacity. Ongoing, stable funding is essential to making sure we can meet ongoing needs and that we are ready and available to respond when new needs arise.

Respectfully submitted,



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