



## **PINE TREE LEGAL ASSISTANCE, INC.**

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### **Testimony of Tom Fritzsche on behalf of Pine Tree Legal Assistance before the Joint Standing Committee on Judiciary and the Appropriations and Financial Affairs Committee**

#### **In Support of Maine state appropriations supporting Pine Tree Legal Assistance**

**February 11, 2025**

Good afternoon, Senators Rotundo and Carney, Representatives Gattine and Kuhn, and esteemed members of the Appropriations and Financial Affairs Committee 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. I am here to testify in support of Maine's appropriation that supports Pine Tree Legal Assistance's civil legal aid to low-income Mainers. I'll say a little about Pine Tree's work in general and then a little about the state's appropriation, how Pine Tree uses it to serve Mainers in need, and how it differs from the Maine Civil Legal Services Fund, which you heard about earlier today.

Pine Tree opened its doors in the summer of 1967 and has been overwhelmed with people in need of our services ever since. We have six offices throughout the state, in Presque Isle, Machias, Bangor, Augusta, Lewiston and Portland. Our staff handle cases in all 16 counties, in all 27 district courts, and in the tribal courts of the Passamaquoddy Tribe and Penobscot Nation. We are Maine's largest non-profit provider of legal services, and for many Mainers needing legal help for housing stability, protection from abuse or harassment, consumer rights, and many other basic needs, Pine Tree is their first and last resort. We represent low-income Mainers statewide with no fees to our clients. 50% of our clients' incomes are below the poverty guidelines, and 84% are below 200% of the poverty guidelines.

#### **Pine Tree Legal Assistance's Services and Impact during 2024:**

In 2024, Pine Tree Legal Assistance worked on 7,372 cases, providing direct legal assistance on a wide range of legal issues. In 2024, Pine Tree served nearly 18,000 people through individual cases, including over 6,000 children. We prioritize meritorious cases where our legal assistance is likely to have a positive impact on the client's life. In 2024, we prevented homelessness for 1,798 households by preventing or delaying an eviction and secured more than 360 new or extended protection orders for victims of domestic violence, sexual assault, stalking, and dating violence.

In one case, we helped a veteran who had several serious unsafe housing issues, including no heat. Our client also received an eviction notice from her landlord, who also happened to be her ex. Our client wanted to move out, but she needed more time to find housing. We negotiated an agreement that provided our client with the additional time that she needed to find new housing. Without our intervention, our client likely would have become homeless and had an eviction order on her record, which is often a major obstacle to finding new housing in the future.

During 2024, Pine Tree also served over 8,500 people through community education activities including consultations, meetings, presentations, and trainings, including, for example, through legal clinics in Fort Kent, Houlton, and Saco, and through classes for landlords through Lewiston Adult Ed.

Pine Tree's informational websites, including [statesidelegal.org](http://statesidelegal.org) for veterans and [kidslegal.org](http://kidslegal.org) for legal rights protecting children, received more than 1.5 million page views in 2024, including our popular "How to Navigate Your Divorce or Parental Rights Case Guide".

Our programs are designed to meet the diverse needs of Mainers while balancing our limited resources. Our practice areas and programs include:

- Our Access to Justice Unit, providing legal information and community education and coordinating our statewide telephonic intake system, through which our staff currently receive over 700 calls each month
- Five statewide practice Groups: Rental Housing, Consumer Law, Public Benefits, Family Law and Victim Rights, and Litigation
- Children's Rights Unit (KIDS Legal)
- Fair Housing Unit
- Farmworker Unit
- Foreclosure Prevention Unit
- Indigenous Peoples Unit
- Low Income Taxpayer Clinic
- Pro Bono Unit
- Veterans Unit

Pine Tree is a great investment and provides an excellent return on investment. In 2024, Pine Tree's legal advocacy resulted in \$3,733,036 in income, savings, and benefits to our clients.

### **The State of Maine appropriation makes Pine Tree's services possible:**

Since 1983, Pine Tree Legal Assistance has received an appropriation from the General Fund to provide services for low-income Mainers. Found on page A549 of this year's budget, this appropriation is a critical investment in stability for many of the most vulnerable members of our communities and helps keep people housed, employed, and healthy. The Supplemental Budget

for Fiscal Year 2022-23, Change Package F-A-2, increased the state's appropriation from \$500,000 per year, the amount appropriated since at least 2017, to \$650,000 per year, in order to fund our Veterans' Unit's ongoing Medical Legal Partnership with Togus to serve Maine veterans in need. The current budget proposal would maintain that level of funding flat from the level appropriated during the past three years, with no new initiatives.

We continue to see significant statewide demand for services. Due to funding and staffing limitations, we had to address 32% of calls for help with only general legal information or a referral to other resources and could not open those as Pine Tree cases. Further, in 29% of the 7,372 cases we handled during 2024, we had to provide a more limited degree of legal service than the client wanted. For example, for some callers requesting full legal representation, we only had enough capacity to provide limited representation or advice.

This budget item is distinct from the Maine Civil Legal Services Fund, which makes possible the civil legal services provided to people all over Maine by Pine Tree Legal Assistance and six other non-profit organizations. The Maine Civil Legal Services Fund is distributed by the Judicial Branch, at no additional cost, through a Commission appointed by the Supreme Court. The General Fund appropriation to the Maine Civil Legal Services Fund is currently on track to drop from \$3.3 million in each of the last two fiscal years to \$1.3 million in the upcoming fiscal years. That reduction would be devastating for the communities served by all seven of the organizations supported in part by the fund, including Pine Tree. Pine Tree Legal Assistance supports maintenance of the line item on Page A549 that I described above, as well as restoration of the previous fiscal year's appropriation to the Maine Civil Legal Services Fund, and, if possible, an increase to that fund. Both sources of support are critical to our ability to uphold equal access to justice for people all over Maine.

### **Medical Legal Partnership with VA Health Systems to Provide Legal Services to Veterans:**

About one in twelve households represented by Pine Tree Legal Assistance last year included a veteran or current military service member. As you heard from attorney Dylan Maeby earlier today, many of our veteran clients find Pine Tree through our unique Medical Legal Partnership with the VA health centers, including the Togus VA Medical Center. The state appropriation I am here to discuss today helps fund this Medical Legal Partnership and allows us to leverage a federal grant that further supports services for Maine veterans. A medical-legal partnership integrates the unique expertise of lawyers into health care settings to help clinicians, case managers, and social workers address civil legal issues at the root of many health challenges.

Our Medical Legal Partnership was one of the first medical legal partnerships with a VA Healthcare system in the country, just the eleventh established nationwide at the time we launched it several years ago using seed funding provided by a Maine-based private foundation. Since then, our Togus partnership has become a leader in delivery of legal services to veterans. The National Center for Medical Legal Partnerships used Pine Tree's materials as a model for best practices for newly developing veteran medical legal partnerships.

When a medical provider or other staff person at Togus or in one of the Community Based Outpatient Clinics, or CBOCs, around Maine identifies a veteran with a civil legal need, they can provide a direct referral to Pine Tree Legal Assistance, saving the veteran time and stress and ensuring efficient access to information and direct representation, when needed. A Pine Tree attorney regularly staffs an office at Togus to accept referrals and provide direct civil legal services to veterans.

With this funding, Pine Tree provides Maine veterans with legal assistance with veteran-specific issues such as discharge upgrades and character of service determinations, as well as with general civil legal needs related to housing stability, discrimination, social security and veterans' benefits. We help veterans with consumer protection issues, credit reporting, utility terminations, auto issues, debt related issues, medical billing problems.

In addition to direct legal services, Pine Tree also provides training to Togus medical and non-medical staff on how to identify civil legal needs of veterans that can improve health outcomes and their lives.

Thank you for your time and for your dedication to the people of Maine. I am happy to answer any questions.

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