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To: Appropriations and Financial Affairs Committee and Judiciary Committee  
Re: Funding for Civil Legal Aid Providers under LD 210  
Date: February 11, 2025

Good afternoon Senator Rotundo, Representative Gattine, and esteemed members of the Appropriations and Financial Affairs Committee, as well as Senator Carney, Representative Kuhn, and esteemed members of the Judiciary Committee.

My name is Carlos Diaz. I was born in Bangor, raised in Bowdoinham, and now live in South Portland. I have been a lawyer in Maine for 30 years, including 17 years as an Assistant Attorney General handling cases involving consumer fraud, civil rights, and child support, 12 years as an Assistant District Attorney prosecuting criminal cases, and one year in private practice in family law. In each of those roles I witnessed firsthand the crucial need for civil legal services for indigent Mainers. For that reason, I volunteer on the Board of Directors of Pine Tree Legal Assistance, where I currently serve as Vice President. I am here to urge you to continue to invest substantially in civil legal aid for Maine people.

Funding for civil legal aid is about helping to meet the most basic needs of the most vulnerable Mainers, such as safety, housing, and health care. It is standing up for a battered woman who needs help getting an order to protect herself and her children from physical abuse. It is defending a poor family facing unlawful eviction from their home in mid-winter. It is advising a refugee about the very real risk of being denied asylum or citizenship, or even being deported, if she pleads to a minor offense. It is protecting senior citizens and persons with disabilities against discrimination, abuse, neglect, and exploitation. These are not luxuries, they are basic needs.

Nor does funding for criminal defense meet these crucial needs. The role of a criminal defense lawyer is limited to defending against criminal charges. A criminal defense lawyer does not assist indigent Mainers with civil legal matters involving protection from abuse, unlawful eviction, or deportation, nor with discrimination, abuse and neglect based on age or disability.

The real impact of Maine's seven civil legal aid providers is often life-changing for their clients. We are saving people from disaster, and possibly changing for the better the trajectory of their lives. However, current funding is inadequate to meet the need, especially in light of expected cutbacks in federal funding. I urge you to deepen our investment in services for indigent, elderly and disabled Mainers in need of civil legal aid.