

Good morning Senator Rotundo, Representative Gattine, and esteemed members of the Appropriations and Financial Affairs Committee, Senator Carney, Representative Kuhn, and esteemed members of the Judiciary Committee, my name is Ellen Gorman, and I live in Falmouth.

I am testifying in support of the \$1.3M appropriation for the Maine Civil Legal Services Fund proposed in the State Biennial Budget (L.D. 210) and asking you to convert the \$4 million one-time funding appropriated by the Legislature in 2023 into on-going support.

I am here as a former judge and a current volunteer. I served on the Law Court for 15 years with Justice Mead, and before that I served 18 years in Maine's trial courts. In retirement I have been teaching at the law school, doing some private mediation, and serving on the Lewiston Commission. I also serve as counsel and chair to the leaders of Maine's legal services providers. This volunteer position is near and dear to my heart because I saw first-hand, for over 30 years, what a difference the civil legal providers make to the effective, efficient, and just operation of a court system.

Judges have to make difficult and important decisions every day in civil cases - cases involving child support, child contact, evictions, protection from abuse orders involving vulnerable and threatened individuals. Judges often have only one day – or less than a day – to get all the information they need to make these very important decisions. The judge's decision must be based solely on the information given to her during that trial, and what information she can consider is limited by the rules of civil procedure and the rules of evidence. If the litigants don't have lawyers, they will not know those rules, and they are much less likely to give the judge the information she needs. The litigants don't know what to present or how to present it and that can result in frustration and defeat for both the litigants and the justice system.

In order for courts to work, people need lawyers and legal advice. With 10% of the population living below the poverty line, and many more just barely getting by, hiring a lawyer is out of the question. And that's where the civil legal providers really make a difference. They provide legal advice and legal services to the neediest and most vulnerable among us. And by doing so, they allow the system to operate fairly, effectively, and efficiently. The legal services lawyers resolve the cases that can be resolved, but if a trial is necessary, they have the skills and the knowledge to advocate for their clients. They don't always win, of course, but they help ensure that the process is fair and effective.

If we want everyone to be treated fairly, if we want a fair and equitable judicial system, if we want people to respect courts and trust the rule of law, we have to ensure that there is justice for all. Justice requires access to courts, and that is only possible when everyone, regardless of finances, has access to legal assistance and legal advice.

Thank you very much for your attention.