

**Comments before the  
Committee on Appropriations and Financial Affairs  
February 11, 2025**

**Reflections on Funding  
for Maine's Civil Legal Services Providers**

**by Justice Andrew M. Mead, Chair  
Maine Justice Action Group**

“Senator Rotundo, Representative Gattine, and Distinguished Members of the Committee on Appropriations and Financial Affairs, and Senator Carney, Representative Kuhn, and Distinguished Members of the Committee on the Judiciary.

Good afternoon.

My name is Andrew Mead. I am the Senior Associate Justice of the Maine Supreme Judicial Court, but I appear today before you exclusively in my role as Chair of the Maine Justice Action Group—which we refer to as JAG. Thank you for this opportunity to address you.

JAG was created more than a quarter of a century ago by Chief Judge Frank M. Coffin of the federal First Circuit Court of Appeals and Chief Justice Daniel E. Wathen of the Maine Supreme Judicial Court. They created a judge-led coalition of civil legal services providers, as well as organizations and individuals committed to civil access to justice.

JAG's primary missions include educating, informing, raising awareness, and . . . advocating for funding for Maine's civil legal services providers. **That is why I am here today.** And again, I thank you for this opportunity.

I know you are well aware of the crisis that is currently unfolding in criminal courts. People are confined to jail and detained over unacceptable periods of time simply due to a lack of availability of counsel.

There is another equally unacceptable crisis occurring on the civil side of the law that deserves—but does not always receive—equal attention, that is: Access to justice in the civil courts for Maine's neediest and underserved populations.

“Civil Legal Services” refers to *civil* legal assistance rendered to those neediest, underserved populations. The impediments to legal representation are many and varied, but predominantly result from being mired at the bottom rungs of the economy.

These families and individuals are faced with deeply life-affecting (and sometimes life-threatening) circumstances where they are forced to navigate the legal system without the aid of knowledgeable advocates.

When folks in those needy and vulnerable categories are forced into the legal system, it can be – and almost invariably is – intimidating, overwhelming, and deeply stressful to them.

These folks often make decisions that are not in their best interest – decisions that often prolong processes or make them unnecessarily difficult or complex.

From my vantage point as a judge for the last 35 years, it is deeply disturbing to watch these scenarios unfold, but as a judge, I cannot intervene and take one side or the other.

We live in an age when our cherished governmental institutions are increasingly viewed with deep distrust and suspicion. And it's important to note that folks in these marginalized populations typically view government as a single, monolithic institution – there is no separation of powers in their world view.

To the unrepresented litigant who walks away from a legal situation as a “loser” who feels he or she did not have a chance from the start, justice is a just a façade, and government is the enemy. We (meaning government as a whole) have failed them.

Our civil legal services providers are on the front lines of combating this cynicism and marginalization. By providing legal services—a voice in other words—their clients leave the legal process with a profoundly different perspective: they were heard; they had a place and a voice in the process. They can accept an adverse result because they had a knowledgeable advocate by their side.

The need is great. The National Justice Index calls for 10 legal aid lawyers for every 10,000 low income people. That sure doesn't sound like many. We estimate that last year's funding has moved us somewhat above 2 lawyers per 10,000I.

I stand in awe of the dedication and commitment to justice that these providers of civil legal services demonstrate every day of the year; MY MESSAGE TODAY IS BOTH SIMPLE AND URGENT: the providers need and deserve an **adequate, consistent and reliable** funding stream to continue their vital work. They need to be able to look to a predictable future.

Down to the specifics:

The Justice Action Group urges the Legislature and the Governor to invest **\$6.4M** in year one, and **\$9.5M** in year two of the 2025-2027 budget. This appropriation would include current baseline funding of \$1.3M, plus \$2 million per year to replace the one-time appropriation of \$4M that the providers are spending over the 2023-2025 budget.

An **additional \$3.1M in each year of the budget** is proposed in order to continue progress toward access to vital civil legal assistance. We would envision adding similar amounts each year for a decade in a quest to reach the nationally recognized standard of 10 legal aid lawyers per 10,000 persons with low income, as I referenced earlier.

IN CONCLUSION:

There is a nasty saying—I am loathe even to repeat it—but I will: Some people say, “You are entitled to as much justice as you can afford.”

The members of the Justice Action Group reject this notion, and we know that you do also. We are all committed to what we believe is the American ideal: “Justice for All.”

Thank you for your time and kind attention. I am available for questions if you wish.