

March 3, 2025

RE: LD 375: An Act to Require Maine Law to Provide an Online Juris Doctor Program

Senator Rafferty, Representative Murphy, and Members of the Educational and Cultural Affairs Committee:

My name is Kasey Nelson and I am submitting this testimony in strong support of LD 375 in my personal capacity. I am a non-traditional, first-generation college student, a working legal professional, and a lifelong Mainer committed to practicing law in Maine. I have spent over a decade in the legal field, and my passion for criminal defense, particularly in addressing Maine's Sixth Amendment crisis, is what drives my pursuit of a Juris Doctor degree. However, despite my acceptance to Maine Law last year, I was forced to withdraw my deferral for this upcoming Fall because its current "FlexTime" program makes it unrealistic for working professionals like me to attend.

The University of Maine School of Law is Maine's only law school and a public institution, which means it has a duty to serve the needs of Maine residents. Yet, for those of us outside of Portland who must work while attending school, there is no realistic path to earning a JD at Maine Law. The FlexTime program requires students to be in Portland for three days a week, an unworkable requirement for someone like me, who lives over an hour and a half away and proudly works full time as the Legal Administrator for the Capital Region Public Defenders. I have a front row seat to the Sixth Amendment crisis and how it is devastating our state.

Over the last few years, Maine Law has reduced its summer courses, and many required courses are only offered once per year, meaning part-time students are left with fewer options. If I were to attend Maine Law under the current structure, I would spend nine hours per week commuting, and it would take six years to complete my degree all while trying to balance not only important work responsibilities, but responsibilities of being a wife and mom of two.

Without a hybrid or online option, students like me are left with one of two choices: take on hundreds of thousands of dollars in debt to attend an out-of-state law school or abandon our dreams of becoming attorneys. Neither option ultimately serves Maine's legal system, which is already struggling with a severe attorney shortage particularly in public defense. Maine Law, as our state's only law school, should be leading the charge in making legal education accessible, not limiting it to those who can afford to relocate or stop working for three years.

Hybrid JD programs exist in other states, maintaining the same rigorous standards as traditional programs while providing flexibility for working professionals. Maine should follow suit. Passing LD 375 would allow Maine Law to better serve its mission as a public institution and ensure that passionate, committed Mainers, especially those in rural areas outside of Portland, can enter the legal profession without sacrificing financial stability.

I urge this committee to support LD 375 and take a critical step toward ensuring that Maine's only law school is truly accessible to the people it is meant to serve, in turn, being a part of the solution to Maine's Sixth Amendment crisis. Thank you for your time and consideration.

Sincerely,

Kasey E. Nelson
Legal Professional and Admitted Law Student