



**University of Maine System Testimony Regarding  
*LD 375, An Act to Require the University of Maine School of Law to  
Provide an Online Degree Program* — Presented by UMS Chief External &  
Governmental Affairs Officer Samantha Warren — March 3, 2025**

Senator Rafferty, Representative Murphy, and distinguished members of the Joint Standing Committee on Education & Cultural Affairs: My name is Sam Warren and I am the Chief External & Governmental Affairs Officer for the University of Maine System (UMS), which is neither for nor against this bill.

In 2019, the University of Maine School of Law (Maine Law) was on the verge of closure, potentially making Maine one of only two states in the nation without a law school. System and State leaders agreed they could not let that happen and have made significant structural changes and investments in the intervening years to create a vibrant law school for all of Maine.

Today, Maine's only and public law school is thriving in its new downtown Portland location under the leadership of Leigh Saufley, the former Chief Justice of the Maine Supreme Judicial Court.

Maine Law welcomed its largest incoming class since 2008 and is currently enjoying its highest spring semester enrollment in more than a decade (270 students). Through its clinics, including a new rural practice clinic based at the University of Maine at Fort Kent, Maine Law student attorneys provided 17,000 hours of pro bono legal aid last year to low-income Mainers, including through our new Rural Practice Clinic in Aroostook County. About half of the school's students come from outside of Maine, yet 80% stay in the state to practice after graduation. Their debt load is the lowest of their New England peers, and their first-time bar passage rate is now 89%, the highest among New England peers. Applications to join Maine Law this fall are up 65% over last year.

These are all promising signs, and ongoing and increased investment — including appropriations for UMS at or above the levels provided in Governor Mills' biennial budget proposal — is critically necessary to further sustain and strengthen Maine Law's existing programs and legal aid services. However, Maine Law, newly rebounding from significant challenges, does not have the financial, human, and technological resources that would be required to create an online J.D. degree program at this time.

We're proud that Maine Law pivoted during the pandemic to keep our students on-track to their J.D. degrees, bar passage, and the workforce. However, online education requires more than a Zoom link. To deliver high-quality programming at a distance and provide the interactivity that is the hallmark of legal education would require technology; additional employees; training for faculty, staff, and students; and the intentional redesign of

curriculum, programs, and policies. For this reason only 19 of the nearly 200 accredited law schools in the nation have received approval from the American Bar Association to offer a degree program in which more than 50% of the credit hours are provided via hybrid or fully online modalities.

**Maine Law is committed to making legal education and legal aid more accessible,** especially for those who are established in rural regions of the state and may not easily be able to relocate to southern Maine. Doing so is central to our mission, and we are making progress.

Through a partnership with the University of Southern Maine, Maine Law offers its students affordable housing at USM's new Portland residence hall, where Southern Maine Community College students also live. There has been an expansion of 3+3 programs at public and private universities, allowing students to earn their J.D. more quickly, and for less money. We're also expanding statewide clinical placements, including through our Rural Practice Clinic and Rural Fellowship, so Maine students can return earlier to their home communities if they so choose. And Maine Law is exploring how to offer greater distance learning options for some second and third year law courses in a manner that maintains academic quality and the close community for which the school is known.

Through the University of Maine at Augusta and in direct response to the needs of our state, our System was a pioneer in distance learning in the 1980s and continues to be a national leader in online education innovation, including through the University of Maine at Presque Isle's flexible YourPace program. Our new UMS strategic plan sets a goal of doubling the number of fully online academic programs we offer by 2028, and Maine Law will be part of that growth, including with the eventual launch of its Master of Legal Studies.

If adequately resourced, we can more seriously consider pursuing accreditation to offer a fully online J.D. degree program in the future. In the meantime, Maine Law — with the full support of our System — will continue to expand access and opportunity to our students and those in the state who need well-prepared legal representation. To that end, this Committee should be aware that several other bills will be considered by your colleagues on the Judiciary Committee that also seek to expand the attorney workforce and access to justice and commerce. One such bill was developed in partnership with Maine Law and will be supported by UMS. It proposes the development of a "rural practice track" that if funded, would include recruitment in rural Maine, housing stipends, education and training in rural practice in the 2L and 3L years, and a loan forgiveness program for those who practice in underserved areas after they graduate. We believe the goals of that bill are aligned with those of LD 375, and hope it will earn the Legislature's endorsement.

I thank you for your ongoing support of the University of Maine System and its law school and welcome your questions.