

# DISABILITY RIGHTS MAINE

April 17, 2025

Senator Anne Carney, Chair  
Representative Amy Kuhn, Chair  
Joint Standing Committee on Judiciary  
State House, Room 438  
Augusta, Maine 04333

Re: Testimony in Support of LD 1022, An Act to Protect and Increase Access to  
Justice in Civil Legal Matters for Persons with Low Incomes

Dear Senator Carney, Representative Kuhn, and Members of the Joint Standing  
Committee on Judiciary:

My name is Lauren Wille and I am the Legal Director at Disability Rights Maine. DRM is Maine's designated Protection and Advocacy agency for people with disabilities. Our mission is to advance justice and equality by enforcing rights and expanding opportunities for people with disabilities in Maine. Thank you for the opportunity to provide testimony in strong support of LD 1022.

At least one in four people in Maine have a disability. Unfortunately, disability and poverty remain closely linked. Between 2017-2021, 52% of working-age Mainers with a disability lived in or near poverty, which was more than twice the rate for Mainers without a disability. Given the significant need for no-cost civil legal services within the disability community, funding for civil legal aid is essential to maintaining and expanding DRM's ability to provide legal representation to Mainers with disabilities whose incomes are below the federal poverty level.

DRM provides civil legal aid to our clients across many areas, including housing, adult guardianship, employment discrimination, accessibility in public accommodations, full community integration, and equal access to education for students with disabilities. In 2024, DRM's twelve attorneys provided direct legal assistance in almost 700 cases statewide.

One area which we have seen requests for assistance substantially increase is with regard to educational access for students with disabilities. Students with disabilities are

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MAINE'S PROTECTION AND ADVOCACY AGENCY FOR PEOPLE WITH DISABILITIES

legally entitled to public education, the same as all students, and are entitled to support and accommodations to guarantee equal access to educational opportunities. Yet, students with disabilities are disproportionately suspended, expelled, secluded, and restrained in our public schools. An increasing number of students are being placed in segregated educational settings, or on abbreviated school days. Many students with disabilities have no access to in-person education at all. When a student is kept out of school, the repercussions extend outward. Parents' employment is disrupted. It can be difficult to get back on track once educational opportunities have been withheld. Students who are able to remain in school fare far better in the long run than students who are excluded.

DRM attorneys work tirelessly with students and their families when students' rights are violated. We help prepare families for Individualized Education Program (IEP) meetings to help them advocate for legally required reasonable accommodations. We provide direct representation in meetings, in administrative hearings, and in alternative dispute resolution such as mediation. DRM attorneys get results for our clients. As a result of this legal assistance, more students with disabilities are able to access education.

DRM has also helped clients maintain housing. When we have cases where a client is experiencing disability-based discrimination, we step in and help negotiate reasonable accommodations to allow a person to avoid eviction and subsequent housing instability. If that does not work, we represent people before the Maine Human Rights Commission or in court.

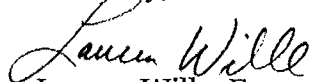
Like many of the other legal aid providers, DRM receives far more requests for assistance than we have the resources to take on. We work closely with the other civil legal aid providers to make referrals as appropriate and to provide information to people seeking assistance. But without direct assistance, the fact is that more students stay out of school, more evictions occur when they can be avoided, and more people will experience employment discrimination based on disability.

Maintaining and increasing the funding of civil legal aid is absolutely crucial to meet the need, and to ensure that access to justice is available to all, and not just to those whose incomes allow it.

For these reasons and many more, DRM strongly supports LD 1022.

Thank you for your time and consideration.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Lauren Wille".

Lauren Wille, Esq.

Legal Director

Disability Rights Maine