



MCEDV.

The Maine Coalition
to End Domestic Violence

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Testimony of Francine Garland Stark
In SUPPORT of LD 1022: "An Act To Protect and Increase Access to Justice in Civil Legal
Matters for Persons with Low Incomes"
Thursday, April 17, 2025

Senator Carney, Representative Kuhn, and members of the Joint Standing Committee on Judiciary, I am writing on behalf of the Maine Coalition to End Domestic Violence (MCEDV)¹ to offer support for protecting and increasing funding for Maine's civil legal aid providers.

Access to legal representation reduces the probability of future domestic abuse and violence. We have long known that this access enhances the long-term safety of survivors and of their children. As noted in the 2016 report, "Economic Impact of Civil Legal Services in Maine," more than 80% of the recipients of civil legal aid in Maine have an annual household income of less than \$25,000; 2/3 of these recipients are women; and more than 30% are aged 65 and older.² These are Maine's most vulnerable communities – communities in which domestic abuse and violence survivors exist in significant numbers. Many survivors rely on our court systems to deal with some aspects of their safety and stability. **In Maine, the vast majority of survivors are navigating our court systems without representation and often without having had an opportunity to even consult with an attorney.** This leads to less successful outcomes and compromises safety efforts.

One of the greatest challenges we see for survivors of domestic abuse and violence in Maine in achieving both short- and long-term safety and stability is the lack of civil legal representation to support their journey through Maine's family court process. When one parent uses abuse and violence against the other, "leaving" is often little more than a change in residence, as the children will remain a life-long tie. Survivors should be able to see our family courts as a resource to help them achieve safety and stability. For too many survivors in Maine, that is not the reality of their experience. Challenges faced by survivors as they navigate the family court include:

- Almost no access to affordable legal representation, particularly in rural Maine;

¹ MCEDV serves and supports a membership of Maine's eight regional domestic violence resource centers as well as two culturally specific service providers. Together, these programs served more than 12,000 victims of domestic violence in Maine last year.

² Todd Gabe, Ph.D., *Economic Impact of Civil Legal Aid Services in Maine* (2016).

- High caseloads for judges and magistrates that result in limited availability of the courts to timely hear urgent, contested issues; and
- Guardians *ad litem* to support families in the family court process are out of reach for those without significant financial means.

Funding to support family court representation for survivors of domestic abuse and violence who need supportive court orders to scaffold their efforts to keep themselves and their children safe is critically needed.

Additionally, Maine's Elder Justice Coordinating Partnership released a comprehensive Elder Justice Roadmap³ with many suggestions about how to better support seniors in Maine who experience elder abuse. It is incumbent upon Maine's legislators to provide sufficient funding to support implementation of these important recommendations and allow for a cross-disciplinary approach to address the generational trauma that we see across Maine. Legal Services for Maine's Elders has been a leader in this effort, and greater support for their work will be essential to continued progress towards the goals outlined in the Roadmap.

The need for the services of the Immigrant Legal Advocacy Project (ILAP) has continued to grow as Maine has seen sustained increases in immigrants, refugees, and asylum seekers across the state. Our New Mainer population includes a significant number of trauma survivors who continue to experience abuse at the hands of a family member. Securing the immigration relief they are eligible for in a timely manner is critical to supporting the safety and security of these survivors. And, as in all legal matters, survivors navigating immigration courts have greatest success when represented by an attorney. ILAP is the sole resource for that in Maine and is unfortunately in the position of turning away so many who qualify for services and who could benefit from their help due solely to insufficient state funding.

We urge you to use your discretion as policymakers and appropriators to make headway on these longstanding challenges by providing sustained funding for Maine's civil legal services providers. Thank you for the opportunity to participate in this important conversation.

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³ "The Maine Elder Justice Roadmap, An Initiative of the Maine Elder Justice Coordinating Partnership," (December 2021), available at: https://www.maine.gov/dhhs/sites/maine.gov.dhhs/files/inline-files/EJCP_Roadmap.pdf.