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

April 17, 2025

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

My name is Will Hayward with Moose Ridge Associates, and I am here on behalf of Maine Community Action Partnership (MeCAP), the statewide association representing Maine's ten Community Action Agencies. These agencies operate in every county in Maine and work every day to help low-income individuals and families achieve safety, stability, and economic security through access to housing, heating assistance, early childhood education, job readiness, and other essential supports.

I am here today to offer strong support for increased state funding for civil legal services in Maine.

Why Civil Legal Services Matter

Community Action Agencies and civil legal service providers share a common mission: to support the most vulnerable members of our communities. While our agencies address basic needs and provide critical support services, we are not equipped to handle the legal problems that frequently arise in the lives of the people we serve. Legal services fill that gap. They protect tenants from unlawful evictions, help our elder neighbors escape financial exploitation, defend workers who are wrongfully denied wages, and assist families who are struggling to access essential public benefits. We refer clients to legal aid providers routinely, and we have seen the difference it makes when a trained advocate can step in and ensure that a person's legal rights are protected.

Illustrative Examples from Communities Across Maine

Across rural and urban areas of Maine, we regularly encounter situations like the following:

- An elder living alone in a mobile home is threatened with eviction in the middle of winter. A legal advocate may be the only person who can help her navigate the court process and avoid homelessness.
- A young single parent is denied SNAP benefits after a paperwork error. With no income and children to feed, they turn to a Community Action Agency for help — and a legal aid attorney may be able to challenge the denial and secure the benefits needed to stabilize the household.

- An older adult begins showing signs of financial exploitation by a relative who has access to their bank account. While our case managers may flag the issue, it is legal services that can seek a protection order, revoke a power of attorney, or pursue restitution if necessary.
- A low-wage worker is being harassed on the job and then fired in retaliation after speaking up. While a CAA may help with job training or rent support, it is a legal advocate who can address the wrongful termination and help the client assert their rights.

These are not isolated cases — they reflect common patterns that Community Action Agencies observe throughout the state. And too often, legal aid programs are forced to turn people away due to lack of capacity, even when their need is urgent.

Civil Legal Services Are a Smart Investment

Funding for civil legal aid is not only a matter of fairness and justice — it is a smart and cost-effective investment. When legal services prevent evictions, maintain access to benefits, or stop abuse, they reduce pressure on emergency housing, public health systems, and other safety net programs. Legal services help stabilize families before crises escalate.

According to national studies, every dollar invested in civil legal aid can yield multiple dollars in avoided public costs. For Maine, this translates into stronger communities, more efficient use of resources, and better outcomes for the people we serve.

Conclusion

Community Action Agencies across Maine are proud to work alongside civil legal aid providers. We urge you to support increased state funding for these services, which are essential to protecting the rights and wellbeing of low-income Mainers and to complementing the work that our agencies do every day. Thank you for your time, your service, and your continued commitment to Maine's most vulnerable residents.