



PINE TREE LEGAL ASSISTANCE, INC.

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

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Good afternoon, Senator Carney, Representative Kuhn, and members of the Judiciary Committee. My name is Wendy Harlan, I live in Freeport, and I am the Board President of Pine Tree Legal Assistance. I am here to express my strong support of LD 1022.

I have been involved with Pine Tree and the other service providers for over twenty-five years, first as Lawyer of the Day for VLP, then volunteering with Pine Tree's foreclosure prevention project, as a volunteer in VLP's small claims clinic, and for many years as a member of the Muskie Access to Justice Event committee. I greatly admire the work legal aid attorneys do, most of all representing clients in the courtroom during what is for many one of the hardest days of their lives. The legal service providers here today provide needed legal care for those who cannot afford private attorneys like me.

Pine Tree helps thousands of Mainers with their most pressing legal needs. We believe that there should be fairness, justice and equality for all, and that if we can instill more fairness in our society, there will be less poverty. Pine Tree holds expertise in more than a dozen areas and handles more than 7,000 cases a year, helping more than 18,000 household members. Those cases include eviction defense work, helping clients obtain government benefits such as SNAP, TANF and SSI; assisting survivors of domestic violence and sexual abuse to obtain protection; and improving outcomes for Maine children by ensuring access to education. We also assist in meeting the needs of specific populations, such as veterans, indigenous people, individuals with disabilities, and those with limited English proficiency.

Pine Tree represents clients throughout the state. Funding from the Maine Civil Legal Services Fund is keeping our rural offices open. This funding source will be incredibly important over the next few years to ensure access to rural legal services, including innovative recruitment and retention of lawyers to staff our local offices, especially in Presque Isle and Machias.

The work Pine Tree attorneys do is exemplary. They are thorough, dedicated and effective. They do not drop issues because they are not profitable, or because they are outside a narrow range of expertise, as some private lawyers do. Instead, civil legal aid providers take a holistic



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view, and if they are not familiar with an area, they either educate themselves or look for someone with experience in the issue to obtain the best results for the client.

The providers work closely with each other and other agencies to provide outreach and comprehensive support to their clients. Pine Tree collaborates with domestic violence resource centers to assist survivors, partners with healthcare providers to address medical-legal issues, and works with social service organizations to ensure clients receive the benefits they are entitled to. By working together, we create a network of support that helps clients achieve stability and security in their lives.

In conclusion, civil legal aid providers are an invaluable resource for the State of Maine, and they are a scarce resource. I encourage you to pass this law to ensure that more Mainers have access to the legal help they need.