



**PINE TREE LEGAL ASSISTANCE, INC.**

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**Testimony of Tom Fritzsche, Executive Director, Pine Tree Legal Assistance  
Before the Joint Standing Committee on Judiciary**

**In support of L.D. 1022, An Act to Protect and Increase Access to Justice in Civil Legal  
Matters for Persons with Low Incomes**

**April 17, 2025**

Good afternoon, Senator Carney, Representative Kuhn, and esteemed members of the Joint Standing Committee on Judiciary. Thank you all for your time and work to ensure equal access to justice for all the people of Maine.

My name is Tom Fritzsche, and I am the Executive Director of Pine Tree Legal Assistance. Pine Tree Legal Assistance has over 90 staff, working out of six offices around the state. Our team, through full legal representation, brief advice, client education and self-help resources, and more, provides free legal services to low-income people throughout Maine. Our staff handle cases in all 16 counties, in all 27 district courts, and in the courts of the Passamaquoddy Tribe and Penobscot Nation. We address issues involving housing, protection from abuse and harassment, consumer protection, access to education and health care, federal tax issues, foreclosure prevention, access to veterans' and other public benefits, and the rights of Indigenous Peoples and farmworkers.

Over the course of the Legislative session, Judiciary Committee members have heard extensively from many of us, as well as our clients, other service providers, and judges, about the need for civil legal services across Maine. You have heard about how civil legal service providers like Pine Tree and our six sister organizations protect the basic rights, dignity, housing, safety, and financial stability of people in all of our communities; how we help our courts run more efficiently by enabling people who would otherwise be unrepresented to reach reasonable settlements with fewer court appearances, and save the courts time; how our work has an indirect economic impact even beyond the dollars spent on legal services directly; how preventing homelessness in the first place is less expensive, in both human impact and in economic cost, than navigating the fall-out when a person or family loses their home; and how civil legal services are just as critical a part of our functioning justice system as criminal defense is.

There is plenty more data about Pine Tree's work and impact in my written testimony, in the annual report to the Maine Civil Legal Services Fund Commission that you can access, and in other materials we have previously provided to the Committee. I am also eager to provide any other information of use to you and encourage you to reach out with questions and ideas, as well as with any legal needs with which our team might be able to assist your constituents.

Today, I want to add two more points for your consideration. First, just as investing in legal services pays off with more economic benefits, the inverse is also true. When legal services funding shrinks, as we are currently on track to see, starting in July, unless L.D. 1022 is enacted and funded, it can cause harm far greater than the lost funding. This is true for non-profit organizations like us, as we use MCLSF money to make the most out of other funding sources, as we continue to leave no stone unturned to try to serve our people. One example is our Low-Income Taxpayer Clinic (LITC) grant from the IRS, which partially funds our services for Maine taxpayers who have federal tax problems. The LITC grant requires a dollar-for-dollar match by Pine Tree and similar organizations around the country. With less MCLSF money, our ability to renew and receive LITC funding to serve Maine taxpayers would shrink.

The negative impact of less MCLSF funding is a problem most of all for people who would lose access to representation. In 2023, 83% of eviction cases in Maine District Courts had at least one unrepresented party. This number was 92% in foreclosure cases and 97% in protection from abuse cases. And those numbers are better than what they have been during many times in Maine's past, and they are better than what they could be in our very near future.

The second and final point I offer today is, as we think about the future Maine we are building now, that our services have an outsize positive impact protecting the safety and wellbeing of children. Living in the households that Pine Tree represented in 2024 alone were over 6,000 Maine children. Their futures look brighter if they grow up in stable housing, with families free from violence and abuse, and with uninterrupted access to education.

One of our recent tax clients was a working father with two children. His tax refund from the IRS was frozen after the IRS denied certain tax credits, in part because they questioned whether his children really lived with him. Our client had tried to resolve the matter on his own, without success. A Pine Tree attorney was able to gather the necessary documents, including records demonstrating that his children had lived with him for the tax year in question. We submitted an audit reconsideration request that was eventually approved by the IRS, who then released the frozen refund, along with additional interest paid by the IRS, totaling more than \$19,000. We first met this client when his family was facing eviction, because he was struggling to pay rent. Pine Tree helped him with his eviction case and the tax issue. The client was able to get caught up on rent and get back on his feet, and his kids avoided the disruption to their lives and schooling that an eviction would have caused.

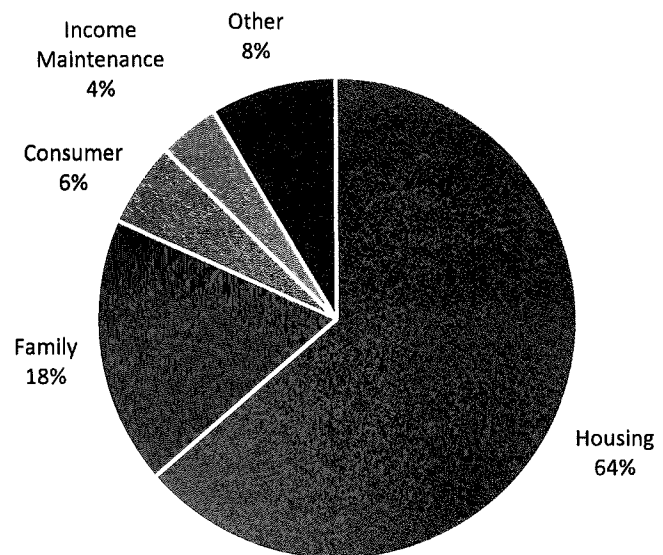
### **Cases Handled in 2024**

This case is just one example of many that show the impact that having a legal advocate can make for regular people all over our state. In 2024, Pine Tree Legal Assistance worked on a total of 7,372 cases. The Maine Civil Legal Service Fund (MCLSF) provided partial funding support for all cases, augmenting and leveraging funding from other sources and ensuring greater access to justice for thousands of Maine people.

Sixty-four percent of Pine Tree cases involved housing issues, including preventing evictions and foreclosures, enforcing safe housing and anti-discrimination laws, and others. Our housing advocacy addressed issues arising in homeownership, federally subsidized housing, public housing, private rental housing, and mobile homes.

Eighteen percent of Pine Tree cases involved family law, primarily working with survivors of domestic and sexual abuse and the non-offending caregivers to child sex abuse victims.

Additionally, six percent of Pine Tree cases involved consumer protections, such as access to utilities, auto issues, and debt; four percent of Pine Tree cases involved income maintenance, including helping people access benefits, such as General Assistance; and other cases handled involved education, employment, tribal, health, juvenile, and other issues. The following chart shows the number of cases handled in 2024 by area of law.



Law Category	Cases Handled
Consumer	418
Education	265
Employment (including tax)	161
Family Law (including PFAs)	1325
Juvenile	20
Health	42
Housing	4,697
Income	303
Individual Rights	26
Miscellaneous (including Tribal law)	115
<b>Total</b>	<b>7,372</b>

### **Number of People Served**

Pine Tree serves Maine people through direct legal services, outreach, and legal information distributed for free to the public through our websites. In 2024, Pine Tree served nearly 18,000 people through individual cases, including over 6,000 children. We served over 8,500 people through community education activities including consultations, meetings, presentations, and trainings.

## **Newly Released Self-Help Forms**

Pine Tree has recently completed a major effort to update and expand some of our self-help tools available for your constituents. At [apps.ptla.org](https://apps.ptla.org), we publish a series of resources that are accessible and designed to help people address certain common legal needs without an attorney. These tools help people write a letter to their landlord asking for their security deposit back or to repair a serious problem in their rental housing that may violate the warranty of habitability. These resources may help people resolve their concerns at an early stage of their dispute. We have similar tools that help people determine if they are eligible for food stamps, defend themselves in debt collection matters, or seek a waiver of court fees if they are eligible.

MCLSF funding is crucial for the maintenance and development of Pine Tree's website resources and self-help tools. Pine Tree maintains three websites: [ptla.org](https://ptla.org), [kidslegal.org](https://kidslegal.org), and [statesidelegal.org](https://statesidelegal.org). All three websites are freely available to any person and remain an important way of increasing access to the justice system, especially for unrepresented people. Pine Tree's websites are nationally recognized for their accessibility and successful provision of tools for unrepresented people to navigate the legal system when they need to do so.

## **Income Eligibility**

To make the most of its limited resources, Pine Tree prioritizes services to individuals and families with a household annual adjusted gross income that is at or below 125% of the federal poverty guidelines, which were, for reference, \$25,550 for a household of two in 2024. The chart below shows the breakdown of households served in 2024 by poverty level.

Below 100% poverty	50%
100% – 199% poverty	34%
Over 200% poverty	16%

Eighty-four percent of our clients had incomes below 200% of the federal poverty guidelines, which, for reference, were \$40,880 for a household of two in 2024.

## **Geographic Area Served**

Pine Tree provides legal services to low-income residents in all sixteen counties. Our six neighborhood offices are strategically located around the state to be close to Maine courts. Our statewide phone intake system provides further access for all Mainers. We conduct outreach at several community locations, such as public libraries and town offices, and accept walk-in intake inquiries from prospective clients at our office locations. Pine Tree also participates in several referral partnerships to receive client referrals directly from other service providers.

The chart below shows the geographical distribution of Pine Tree's cases and clients in 2024.

County	Cases Handled	All People Served
Androscoggin	864	2147
Aroostook	371	870
Cumberland	1,599	3,473
Franklin	123	335
Hancock	195	442
Kennebec	782	1906
Knox	132	329
Lincoln	93	221
Oxford	324	901
Penobscot	1,037	2,448
Piscataquis	84	250
Sagadahoc	157	378
Somerset	298	769
Waldo	169	422
Washington	158	384
York	918	2,173
Out of State	65	197
Unknown	3	9
<b>Total</b>	<b>7,372</b>	<b>17,654</b>

### **Outcome Measurements**

Pine Tree tracks both the number of cases opened and closed within a given period and the extent to which the client's objectives were achieved. Specific case closing codes are used to track the results of closed cases and to distinguish between successful and unsuccessful outcomes. Additionally, Pine Tree records data on more than 50 potential case outcomes.

The following data highlight some of Pine Tree's most significant outcomes. In 2024, Pine Tree's advocacy:

- Resulted in \$3,733,036 in income, savings, and benefits to our clients.
- Prevented homelessness for 1,798 households by preventing or delaying an eviction.
- Preserved housing subsidies for eligible tenant families worth more than \$250,000 annually.
- Secured more than 360 new or extended protection orders for victims of domestic violence, sexual assault, stalking, and dating violence.

### **Conclusion**

A hallmark of Pine Tree's legacy over the past 58 years is our innovation - creating new and innovative ways to expand access to justice. Pine Tree continued this legacy in 2024 with the

launch of a new rural fellowship to increase services Downeast and in Aroostook County. As part of this new approach to recruiting attorneys to some areas of greatest need, we have named the Fellowship after Ellie and Charlie Miller, two longtime advocates for equal access to justice in Maine. The Rural Justice Fellowship is for new law school graduates who commit to at least two years of service and rotate between our Machias and Presque Isle offices, so that there will always be one fellow based in each office. Pine Tree's Presque Isle office serves the whole of Aroostook County, while our Machias office serves Washington and Hancock Counties. The first Miller Fellow is already up and running, augmenting our services to Downeast clients, and the second Miller Fellow will start in Presque Isle in September 2025. This new initiative is made possible, in large part, due to funding from the Maine Civil Legal Services Fund.

Despite our successes, Pine Tree, and the people we serve, continue to face serious challenges. Our clients continue to struggle with an affordable housing crisis and economic uncertainty. Pine Tree is facing financial uncertainty as many of our funding sources are at risk of decreasing or being eliminated altogether.

Thanks to the funding provided through the Maine Civil Legal Services Fund and other sources, our team continues to strive to meet the needs of our clients all over Maine. Every Pine Tree office – from Presque Isle to Portland – was supported with MCLSF funding in the past year. That funding also assured Pine Tree's presence online, allowing individuals all over the state to access information about legal rights and responsibilities. MCLSF funding will remain very important to our work in 2025. We are very grateful to the Maine Legislature and State leadership for their continuing support of the Maine Civil Legal Services Fund.

Thank you for your time and your dedication. I urge you to support L.D. 1022 to ensure stable, reliable funding for legal aid through the MCLSF, and to ensure equal access to justice for Maine people, regardless of how much money we have. I welcome your questions.