



Testimony of Lucia Hunt, Esq.  
Pine Tree Legal Assistance, Inc.

**Speaking in Support of LD 1139  
An Act to Provide Funding for Essential Services for Victims of Crimes  
Before the Joint Standing Committee on Judiciary**

Date of Public Hearing: April 17, 2025

Senator Carney, Representative Kuhn, and members of the Joint Standing Committee on Judiciary, my name is Lucia Hunt. I am the directing attorney of the Family Law and Victim Rights Unit at Pine Tree Legal Assistance, Inc., and I am speaking to you today in support of LD 1139 An Act to Provide Funding for Essential Services for Victims of Crimes.

Pine Tree is a nonprofit organization with offices in Presque Isle, Machias, Bangor, Augusta, Lewiston, and Portland. Since 1967, Pine Tree Legal Assistance has provided free legal services to low-income people throughout the State of Maine. Our staff handle cases in all 16 counties, in all district courts, and in the courts of the Passamaquoddy Tribe and Penobscot Nation.

In 2024, Pine Tree Legal Assistance worked on a total of 7,376 cases. We served 17,658 people through individual cases, including 6,457 children. Pine Tree served an additional 8,664 people through community education activities including consultations, meetings, presentations, and trainings.

To make the most of our 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, \$24,650 for a household of two in 2023. Pine Tree provides services in most major types of civil legal issues, including consumer protection, housing, tax law, employment, veterans' issues, access to education, health, income maintenance, and family law and victim rights.

**Civil Legal Representation for Survivors**

Attorneys in Pine Tree's statewide Family Law and Victim Rights unit represent survivors of domestic violence, sexual assault, and stalking. In 2024, we handled 1,326 civil legal cases for survivors. This is about 18% of Pine Tree's total cases for 2024. Almost half of our work in the Family Law and Victim Rights Unit is supported by VOCA (Victims of Crime Act) funds.

Pine Tree has been receiving VOCA funds since 2015. We began with a pilot project based in our Lewiston office, prioritizing civil legal cases for non-offending parents and caretakers of child victims of sexual assault who were interviewed at the local Child Advocacy Center and referred directly to our civil legal attorney. In January of 2017, Pine Tree launched a VOCA funded expansion of our existing legal services for survivors, which allowed us for the first time to **provide legal representation for survivors in every courthouse in the state**, including many rural courts where no other legal representation had been available for survivors. Using VOCA funding we are also able to **help child victims and their families**, something our other federal grants restrict according to age.

In civil cases, like protection from abuse actions, survivors have no right to court-appointed counsel. Although the people we help in these cases are victims of crime, they often turn to the civil legal system to address their needs for safety, to seek justice, and to protect their children. VOCA funding allows Pine Tree to represent people in Protection from Abuse, family matters like divorce and parental rights, and Title IX cases.

Having legal representation makes a significant difference in the outcome of civil legal cases. In one study, 83% of victims represented by an attorney successfully obtained a protective order, as compared to just 32% of victims without an attorney.<sup>1</sup>

Protecting people from ongoing harm is also a good investment and can prevent further costs, both the immeasurable harms of being subjected to violence by an intimate partner, or sexually assaulted, but also monetary harm. According to a 2018 medical study, the estimated intimate partner violence lifetime cost was \$103,767 per female victim and \$23,414 per male victim.<sup>2</sup> This includes medical costs, lost productivity, property loss, and more. The study found that about 37% of the lifetime costs were paid by government sources.

### Maine's Network of Victim Services Resources

Pine Tree Legal's services exist as part of the network of resources available to survivors throughout the state. We receive referrals directly from the child advocacy centers, domestic violence resource centers, and sexual assault support centers. We work closely with all the other VOCA-funded providers to form an effective and efficient set of resources, connected in a way that best supports survivors and allows us each to play a unique role. We are here in front of you today together because each of these pieces forms a crucial part of the essential services that support victims. The Lewiston tragedy gave us a poignant example of the ways VOCA-funded agencies work together, responding quickly and efficiently to the crisis in the hours and days after the shooting. Victim services is a great example of a Maine system that is working, and

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<sup>1</sup> Jane Murphy, *Engaging with the State: The Growing Reliance on Lawyers and Judges to Protect Battered Women*, 11 Am. U. J. Gender Soc. Pol'y & L. 499, 511-12 (2003).

<sup>2</sup> Cora Peterson, et al, *Lifetime Economic Burden of Intimate Partner Violence Among U.S. Adults*, 55 Am. J. Prev. Med. 433 (Oct. 2018), *available at* <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC6161830/>.

working well- but it will not survive a cut of this magnitude, and the network that has been so carefully built will take years to re-establish.

This network extends to other legal services, both those we offer internally at Pine Tree Legal as well as the other civil legal services for low-income people in Maine. Pine Tree and Legal Services for the Elderly are two organizations that provide VOCA-funded services as well as other general civil legal services funded, among other ways, through the Maine Civil Legal Services Fund. The one-time appropriation to augment the Maine Civil Legal Services Fund in 2024 will be helpful to us and our other civil legal aid partners, but without ongoing stability in the full group of VOCA grantees, Pine Tree will be less effective not only in our VOCA-funded services but across all our work, which is interconnected.

VOCA-funded services are a critical part of what we do. I want to share a client story from one of the first cases we handled under VOCA funding.

### Client Story

During our VOCA pilot project, 10 years ago, we represented a client in a PFA case in Franklin County. Pine Tree had never had victim rights legal representation in this region, before VOCA funding. The Pine Tree attorney helped the client secure a final protection from abuse order. After the case was over, the client told us that she had tried to leave the relationship many years before, even filing a previous protection from abuse complaint. Before her court date, her husband hired an attorney, who contacted her and told her he would sue her for defamation if she went forward with her order. Intimidated, she didn't go to court for her final hearing. Instead, she reconciled with her husband and endured years more of his abuse. When she reached a breaking point because of the impact of the abuse on her children, she filed again. This time, she was referred Pine Tree for legal representation. This time, she was able to finally leave the relationship with a court order that protected her and her children, and granted her the other relief she needed to get a fresh start on her own. VOCA funding made that possible.

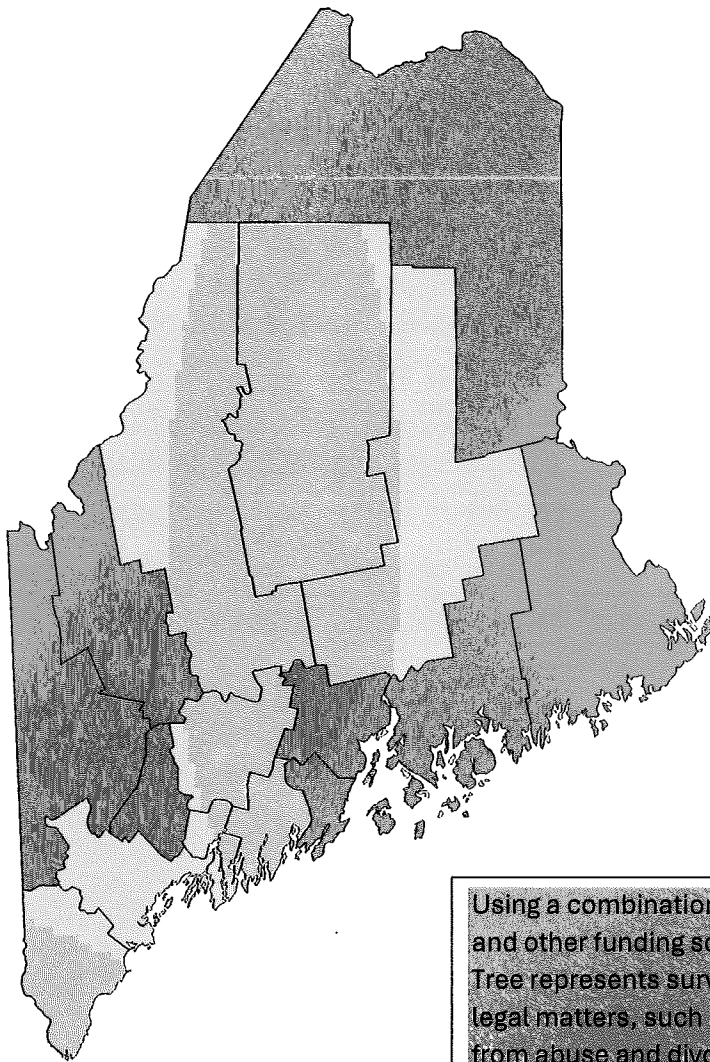
When I think about what cuts to this programming will mean, I think back to that client and her experience. Even now, we aren't able to meet the demand for our services. If our funding is reduced, survivors will be back in those dark ages- stuck in abusive situations with no legal support.

With our current VOCA funding, our attorneys are in every courthouse in the state, representing survivors every day of the week. They are standing up to keep survivors safe, and using Maine's laws to protect them. I cannot imagine returning to a time when legal services are not available for many survivors.

Thank you to Senator Carney and her co-sponsors for introducing this bill. Thank you to the committee for your time and attention, when there are so many demands in front of you. I ask for your support so that we can continue representing Maine survivors.

## Pine Tree Legal Assistance

### 2024 Sexual Assault and Domestic Violence Funding Sources



**Funding from VOCA  
and Other Sources**

**VOCA Funding Only**

Using a combination of VOCA and other funding sources, Pine Tree represents survivors in civil legal matters, such as protection from abuse and divorce cases.

In 2024, PTLA handled **1,326** cases helping survivors with civil legal issues directly related to domestic and sexual violence.

#### AT PINE TREE LEGAL ASSISTANCE, VOCA:

Supports almost half of Pine Tree's survivor-focused work

Is the sole source of funding for representation of survivors in many rural areas

Allows Pine Tree to help child victims (under age 11)

Comes with federal restrictions:

- Only supports direct civil legal services to victims of crime (someone who has suffered physical, sexual, financial, or emotional harm as a result of the commission of a crime). 28 CFR § 94.102
- Legal assistance can only be provided on an emergency basis and where the need for such services arises as a direct result of the victimization. 28 CFR § 94.119(f)