

Administrative Office of the Courts

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Judicial Branch testimony in favor of LD 1139, An Act to Provide Funding for Essential Services for Victims of Crimes:

Senator Carney, Representative Kuhn, and members of the Joint Standing Committee on Judiciary, my name is Julie Finn and I represent the Judicial Branch. I would like to provide testimony in support of this bill.

As you have heard, LD 1139 provides funding to replace federal support that has been reduced under the Victims of Crime Act, or VOCA. Because VOCA funds support the work of the Judicial Branch both directly and indirectly, the loss of this funding would have a negative impact on the courts.

The loss of funding would negatively affect the Judicial Branch's Court Appointed Special Advocate program, often referred to as the Maine CASA program. The Maine CASA program was established in 1985 to recruit, screen, train, and oversee community volunteers who serve as guardians ad litem (also referred to as CASA GALs) to advocate for the best interests of children when concerns of child abuse or neglect lead the Department of Health and Human Services to file a child protection petition in District Court. When a child protection case commences in District Court, the court is required to appoint a guardian ad litem (GAL) for the child. Maine statute permits the court to appoint either an attorney GAL or a CASA GAL.

Presently, 106 committed volunteers are credentialed to serve as CASA GALs in Maine. The current roster of CASA GALs offer a wealth of experience—they include retired medical professionals, teachers, law enforcement, as well as law students and attorneys. CASA GALs must abide by the same statutory requirements as attorney GALs, and requirements for CASAs sometimes go above and beyond those for attorney GALs. For example, absent good cause, CASAs are required to meet with each child once per month, as opposed to once every three months, which is the requirement for attorney GALs. Every CASA GAL assigned to a case is supervised by a legal services advisor who is a licensed Maine attorney and who reviews every CASA GAL report prior to submission to the court, assists CASAs in preparation for trial, and attends court hearings with CASAs, as needed. The Maine CASA program currently has two full-time legal services advisors.

In the current federal fiscal year ending on September 30, 2025, Maine CASA received \$344,800 in VOCA funding. VOCA funds are used to support a variety of the Maine CASA program's costs, including:

- Training expenses for new and rostered CASAs;
- Mileage reimbursement for CASAs;

- Personnel salary and benefits; and
- General operating expenses, such as a subscription to a CASA specific case management system and the maintenance of a Maine CASA website.

Ensuring the stability of the Maine CASA program through continued funding makes good sense from a financial perspective. As outlined above, the court is *required by law* to appoint a GAL to every child protection case that is filed in the District Court, at no expense to the family. If the Maine CASA program dissolves, then all GAL appointments in child protection cases will be an attorney GAL, paid at the state's \$150 per hour rate. Let's use an example to illustrate what that would mean for the state from a cost perspective. Attorney GALs bill the state for their work at the conclusion of legal stages in a child protection case. One such legal stage is the judicial review stage for which an attorney GAL can bill a maximum of 15 hours without prior court approval. The estimated cost to the state of an attorney GAL billing for 15 hours for a judicial review would be \$2,250 for their services (15 hours x \$150 per hour) plus an estimated \$31 for mileage for a total of \$2,281. In contrast, the cost to the state of a CASA GAL performing services for a judicial review would be approximately \$410.17. This accounts for the supervision of the CASA GAL by a legal services advisor, program and administrative support, and training.

Additionally, the continued operation of the Maine CASA program helps to grow the pool of available GALs to advocate for children in child protection cases at a time of need. Increasingly, the GAL Services Coordinator for the Maine Judicial Branch is receiving emails from clerks expressing difficulty in finding a GAL to appoint to child protection cases. Maine CASA expands the pool of GALs by adding individuals with a wealth of experience and an excellent support structure that includes legal oversight so that the children of Maine can benefit from the quality advocacy they deserve. Without CASAs, the courts would be even more hard pressed to find GALs for these matters.

In addition to the importance of VOCA funding to the Maine CASA program, VOCA funding is critical for other services that help the courts run more efficiently and effectively. For example, VOCA provides funding for statewide domestic violence and sexual assault helplines that are staffed 24 hours per day, seven days per week. If these hotlines are not readily available to victims, it could present a safety concern for Maine's citizens while also increasing the public's outreach to court clerks for general guidance. VOCA funds also support Victim Witness Advocates who assist victims of crime and answer questions related to court proceedings that may otherwise be directed to the clerks' offices. Finally, VOCA funds assist civil legal service providers in Maine who assist litigants, which can (1) increase the likelihood of agreements, (2) reduce the time that a judge must spend explaining the law and court process, and (3) increase access to justice for Maine people. In a time of strained judicial resources, the efficiencies created by the provision of legal assistance to litigants streamline difficult dockets, thereby creating more time for other matters.

For all these reasons, the Judicial Branch supports the passage of LD 1139. Thank you for your time and attention. I would be happy to answer any questions.