



# HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

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*Testimony of Representative Amy D. Kuhn introducing*  
**LD 1691, An Act to Expand Access to Justice in Rural Maine by Incentivizing Attorneys to Practice in Underserved Areas**  
*Before the Joint Standing Committee on Education and Cultural Affairs*

Senator Rafferty, Representative Murphy and distinguished members of the Education and Cultural Affairs Committee, my name is Amy Kuhn and I proudly represent House District 111 in the town of Falmouth. It is a pleasure to be with you today to introduce **LD 1691, An Act to Expand Access to Justice in Rural Maine by Incentivizing Attorneys to Practice in Underserved Areas**.

This bill seeks to address two issues, which together are impacting access to justice in rural Maine.

The first issue relates to limitations on access to legal education for potential students from rural Maine. Barriers such as distance to Portland, cost of housing and availability of housing all make it difficult for individuals who do not live within the greater Portland area to attend Maine Law and become eligible for bar admission. I believe this committee has heard multiple bills this session seeking to address those barriers through, for example, greater access to online learning, night classes and more.

The second issue relates to the lack of attorneys in rural Maine to meet the civil and criminal legal needs of residents currently living in these underserved areas. The challenges to placing law school graduates here are also varied, from graduates' unfamiliarity with rural practice settings, to the financial reality that when alumni have significant debt to pay off, it is more efficient for them to pursue a higher paying job in Portland than it is to pick up a general practice in rural Maine.

During my time on the Judiciary Committee in the 131<sup>st</sup> Legislature, it became clear that the intersection of these two phenomena are playing a role in access to justice in rural Maine. This committee is no doubt aware that the state of Maine has been found in violation of the Sixth Amendment rights of certain criminal defendants due to the lack of available defense counsel to represent them in criminal proceedings. The Maine Commission on Public Defense Services has repeatedly pointed to the lack of available lawyers to do the jobs as a critical component of this

crisis. As a state, we should be prioritizing building this pipeline to promote long-term well-being and resilience in our communities.

Following the Legislature's adjournment last spring, I reached out to the law school to learn more about how we can link these concerns and better meet the legal needs of our state. I was pleased to work collaboratively with Maine Law to consider how we can expand current Maine Law programs that are already showing success and add additional resources to close certain gaps and enhance opportunity. The result is the comprehensive Rural Practice Track Program described in this bill, which addresses student and alumni needs from admissions through post graduate job placement.

From here, I would like to walk you through the bill, beginning at page four, section two, which lays out the components of a new Rural Practice Track at Maine Law. If we look at these components chronologically from the perspective of a future Maine attorney, the program would involve:

- Marketing and outreach to high school and college students from rural areas to raise awareness of Maine Law and the opportunities it offers.
- Once accepted, provision of a housing stipend for first and second years to cover four nights per week at the University of Southern Maine's dorms. This eliminates the need for students to maintain two households (even if they were able to find housing locally).
- During first- and second-year summers, resources for Maine Law to increase its already successful rural summer internship programs, which have led to successful placement long-term.
- During third-year, additional opportunities for externships and internships for supervised student attorneys to provide critically needed legal services to rural Mainers.

The final component is a loan repayment program administered by Finance Authority of Maine (FAME) to award loans and enter into loan repayment agreements with eligible Maine residents. Eligibility is limited to Maine residents who are applying to law school or recently graduated from law school who demonstrate an interest in or commitment to providing legal services in an underserved area of the state. This loan repayment component is critical to solidify alumni's longer-term commitment to settling and working in more remote areas.

I believe that a representative from FAME is here to testify on the bill; I wanted to offer some input on the points he raises. First, FAME notes a few drafting concerns, which I agree with. Second, FAME identified the need for a fiscal note. On this topic, the maximum repayment amount currently in the bill is \$100,000. However, I have come to understand that the average debt of a Maine Law graduate is \$75,000, so I believe there is an opportunity for the committee to scale back that commitment through an amendment. Third, I understand that the committee also heard a bill (LD 1653) today that would consolidate professional loan forgiveness programs. If that bill is to proceed, I would ask that the Access to Justice Loan Program be included.

Finally, the bill provides for a report back to both the Education and Judiciary Committees with the authority to report out legislation so that we can assess its efficacy and make changes if needed.

I would like to direct the committee's attention to the strong bipartisan sponsorship list on this bill. Legislators from both sides of the aisle and all over the state recognize the need to offer more opportunity for professional success to our young people in rural Maine, especially when they can go forward to serve our state by filling critical workforce needs. I ask all of you to support it as well.

I thank you for the opportunity to present this bill and I would be happy to answer any questions.