



**Testimony by William Norbert
Governmental Affairs and Communications Manager**

Neither For Nor Against L.D. 1691

An Act to Expand Access to Justice in Rural Maine by Incentivizing Attorneys to Practice in Rural Areas

May 5, 2025

Joint Standing Committee on Education and Cultural Affairs

Senator Rafferty, Representative Murphy, and Distinguished Members of the Joint Standing Committee on Education and Cultural Affairs:

My name is Bill Norbert. I am the Governmental Affairs and Communications Manager at the Finance Authority of Maine (FAME). I am presenting this testimony Neither For Nor Against Section 1 of L.D. 1691, *An Act to Expand Access to Justice in Rural Maine by Incentivizing Attorneys to Practice in Rural Areas*. We take no position on Section 2 of the bill proposing a rural practice track at the University of Maine School of Law.

FAME's mission is to enrich business and educational outcomes through relevant, timely financial support to Maine's people. Our vision is a Maine where all people have access to improved economic outcomes through business growth and education attainment

This bill would establish within FAME the Access to Justice Loan Program and Access to Justice Loan Program Revolving Fund for the purpose of awarding loans to and entering into loan repayment agreements with eligible Maine residents. Program eligibility would be limited to Maine residents who demonstrate an interest in or commitment to providing legal services in an underserved area of the state and who are enrolled or intend to enroll in an accredited law school and demonstrate financial need or have graduated from an accredited law school within the prior five years, are licensed or eligible to be licensed to practice law in the state, and have outstanding law school loans. The maximum amount of a loan to or loan repayment agreement with a program participant would be \$25,000 per year for a period of up to four years.

As you know, FAME administers a variety of grant, loan, and loan repayment programs to help meet Maine's workforce needs. Today we will be supporting a bill sponsored on our behalf by Representative Sargent, L.D. 1653, *An Act to Develop*

Maine's Credentialed Workforce, that seeks to get a better handle on the various proposals for loan and loan repayment programs in a way that is efficient, cost-effective, and responsive to our state's current workforce needs. Under that bill, we would administer one all-encompassing workforce credentialing loan repayment program to provide us with more flexibility and efficiency while allowing us to address pressing workforce needs.

This session alone, there are at least six separate proposals to create new grant, loan, or loan repayment programs for FAME to administer. These cover occupations ranging from lawyers (this bill) to dentists (also to be heard today) to loggers and fishermen to recent college graduates employed in the trades (tool loans) to foreign trained physicians and state and federal workers (shutdown loans). If enacted and funded, these concepts would be added to the seven existing grant, loan and loan repayment programs we currently administer: Educators for Maine; Maine Health Professions Loan Program; Maine Health Care Provider Loan Repayment Pilot Program; Maine Veterinary Medicine Loan Program; Maine Dental Education Loan and Loan Repayment Program; the Nursing Education Loan Repayment Program; and the Foreign Credentialing and Skills Recognition Grant Program.

FAME could administer this new program should the Governor and Legislature approve it and provide us with sufficient funding to administer it. I note that there is no appropriations section in the bill as currently drafted. Funding would be necessary for FAME to administer the program. How much funding is up to you, but to help you think about it: the maximum amount of a loan to or loan repayment agreement proposed in the bill for a program participant would be \$25,000 per year for a period of up to four years (\$100,000 per participant). If you wish to fund five students or lawyers annually, that would require \$500,000 per year (plus modest administrative costs for FAME) ongoing. Ten students or lawyers per year would require at least \$1 million in ongoing funding. We also would appreciate some guidance before commencing rulemaking as to how best to define "underserved areas" in the state. The bill permits us to consult with stakeholders from the University of Maine System and others, which we surely would do. We also respectfully request that you consider modifying language in the Fund section (lines 33-35 on page 3) to allow for FAME's "reasonable administrative costs" to be deducted from the Fund as needed. The current language limiting us to only interest income on a yet-to-be-determined Fund amount is likely insufficient. Finally, we do not believe the rulemaking language for the fund (lines 4-6 on page 4) is necessary since the bill already provides rulemaking language for the program generally in lines 15-17 on page 3.

Thank you for your consideration and I would be happy to answer any questions you might have.