

**University of Maine System Testimony In Support of
*LD 1691, An Act to Expand Access to Justice in Rural Maine by Incentivizing
Attorneys to Practice in Underserved Areas* — Presented by UMS Chief External &
Governmental Affairs Officer Samantha Warren — May 5, 2025**

Senator Rafferty, Representative Murphy, and distinguished members of the Joint Standing Committee on Education & Cultural Affairs: My name is Sam Warren and I am the Chief External & Governmental Affairs Officer for the University of Maine System (UMS).

In 2019, the University of Maine School of Law (Maine Law) was on the verge of closure. In recognition that Maine's only law school was a strategic asset to the state that must be sustained and strengthened, UMS Trustees chartered a committee of respected Maine leaders to advise them on the school's future direction. This esteemed group concluded that serving the needs of rural Maine, where the majority of our population lives but where there is a severe shortage of attorneys, must be foundational to Maine Law's future.

While now headquartered in downtown Portland close to courts and commerce, in keeping with that committee's recommendations and the state's needs, Maine Law has become a law school — and a force for good — for all of Maine. And its efforts to expand access to justice in rural Maine have been recognized as a model by the U.S. Department of Justice.

For example, Maine Law has scaled up its Rural Law Fellowship program, which was launched in 2017 with pilot funding from the Maine Justice Foundation and provides our students rural mentors and paid 10-week summer fellowships working in law offices in the state's most underserved counties. This effort to expose students to the benefits of rural practice has yielded an encouraging ultimate placement rate, with one in three participants deciding to practice in rural Maine upon graduation.

More recently, with the support of Maine Attorney General Frey, the Legislature, and Governor Mills, our law school launched a Rural Practice Clinic that is located at the University of Maine at Fort Kent. While student and supervising faculty recruitment to this remote clinic has admittedly proven challenging, there is no shortage of clients. In its first two years, student attorneys at this Aroostook County clinic have represented more than 100 low-income Mainers in civil and criminal proceedings, many of whom would have otherwise lacked access to justice. This service contributes to the 17,000 hours of pro bono legal aid Maine Law now provides annually. During Chancellor Malloy's recent State of UMS address, you met Dan Gawrys, a law student from Massachusetts whose experience in the County through both our rural fellowship and rural clinic programs have sold him on staying in northern Maine, where he plans to practice after graduation at a small firm in Presque Isle started and fully staffed by Maine Law alumni.

LD 1691 is the result of conversations that began last year when Rep. Amy Kuhn approached us about further advancing Maine Law's ability to close Maine's justice gap.

As we have previously discussed with the Committee, our law school is not yet prepared to launch a hybrid or fully online J.D. degree program, nor do we think that would fully meet the demand in rural Maine for a highly qualified attorney workforce. Instead, we believe a comprehensive approach that starts as early as high school and supports a new lawyer through their formative years of rural practice with targeted loan forgiveness would be most effective.

Specifically, the Maine Law rural practice track proposed by this bill includes:

- **Rural student recruitment**, building on our expanding outreach to Maine high schools (e.g. law Extended Learning Opportunities) and postsecondary institutions, including those we partner with to offer accelerated 3+3 programs that allow students to earn a bachelor's degree and a Juris Doctor in just six years.
- **Housing stipends** for University of Southern Maine residence halls to make it easier for students to move to Portland for law school and then return/relocate to rural Maine for clinical experiences and to practice upon graduation.
- **Expanded experiential opportunities in rural Maine**, including through internships and fellowships, with a focus on underserved communities where UMS has campuses that could provide free or reduced-cost student housing, like Farmington and Machias. Depending on funding availability, tuition reimbursement would also incentivize students to undertake rural experiential learning, especially more remote placements like northern and Downeast Maine.

The more student debt a graduate has, the less likely they are to practice in rural regions where salaries may be lower and their debt harder to discharge. While Maine Law's tuition is relatively affordable — about half the cost of private law schools and 20% less than the national public law school average — its graduates still have approximately \$75,000 in debt (at least one-third less than the national average). LD 1691 proposes a loan forgiveness program similar to others strategically established by the Legislature to incentivize critically needed professionals (dentists, doctors, veterinarians) to practice in underserved regions of the state. The amount proposed to be forgiven for those eligible would significantly reduce or eliminate the barrier of law school debt to rural relocation and complement other recruitment and retention efforts.

In 2019, the Committee to Advise on the Future Direction of Maine Law noted, "While one could argue that without Maine Law lawyers educated elsewhere will come to Maine, there is little evidence to suggest that those lawyers will settle anywhere but in Maine's largest cities. Without Maine Law, Maine businesses, institutions, and people will be underserved in the communities that most need legal services." The need for rural lawyers is even more pressing now than it was then. However, thanks to the structural changes and strategic investments made in the intervening years and proposed by LD 1691, Maine's nationally recognized law school is better positioned than ever to grow the size and skill of our state's rural attorney workforce.

I thank you for your ongoing support of the University of Maine System and our law school and welcome your questions.