

**University of Maine System Testimony Regarding
*LD 1833, An Act to Expand Law Education and Training by Creating a Night Law
School Program* — 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, potentially making Maine one of only two states in the nation without a law school. System and State leaders agreed they could not let that happen and have made significant structural changes and investments in the intervening years to create a vibrant law school for all of Maine. Thank you. Today, Maine's only and public law school is thriving in its new downtown Portland location under the leadership of Leigh Saufley, the former Chief Justice of the Maine Supreme Judicial Court.

This past fall, Maine Law welcomed its largest incoming class since at least 2008 and with 270 total students, we are currently enjoying our highest enrollment in more than a decade. About half of the school's students come from outside of Maine, yet many will stay in the state to practice after graduation. Their debt load is the lowest of their New England peers, and their first-time bar passage rate is now 89%, the highest among New England peers. Applications to join Maine Law this fall are up 60% over last year, a far greater number than Maine Law's New England peers.

Just last month, Maine Law was recognized by U.S. News & World Report as one of the nation's top law schools, marking the first time since 2010 the state's only and public law school has been in the top 100. In addition to its overall score and consistent with the state's needs, we are incredibly proud that Maine Law was ranked No. 14 for sending graduates into Public Service Law.

These are all promising signs. Ongoing and increased investment — including appropriations for UMS at or above the levels provided in Governor Mills' original FY26-27 biennial budget proposal and endorsed by a bipartisan majority of this Committee — is critically necessary to further sustain and strengthen Maine Law's existing programs and legal aid services.

Earlier this session, you unanimously passed a Resolve directing UMS to study the feasibility of expanding distance learning through Maine Law and report back to the Committee by November 2026. This amended version of LD 375, *An Act to Require the University of Maine School of Law to Provide an Online Degree Program*, was a thoughtful response to testimony from Chief Justice Valerie Stanfill about accreditation of online J.D.

programs, and from our System about Maine Law's limited financial, human, and technological capacity as it continues to rebuild.

We believe the intent of LD 1833, which is to enhance and expand statewide access to high-quality legal education and representation, will be addressed by that Resolve. As part of our study process, UMS can commit to also considering the model proposed by this bill, which leverages our flagship's location in eastern Maine and is consistent with our System's increasing focus on multi-university collaboration. Other examples of Maine Law partnering include through its Rural Practice Clinic, which is located at the University of Maine at Fort Kent, and with the University of Southern Maine, which houses law students in its Portland Commons residence hall.

I want to reinforce again that Maine Law is committed to making quality legal education and legal services more accessible, especially for those who may not easily be able to relocate to southern Maine. Doing so is central to our mission to be a law school — and a force for good — for all of Maine, and we are making progress. We look forward to presenting the feasibility study findings to you next year. We are grateful to Sen. Joe Baldacci, a Maine Law alumnus, for proposing this concept, as well as fellow Maine Law alumnus Sen. Trey Stewart, who sponsored LD 375. I also wish to acknowledge Rep. Ken Fredette, another Maine Law alumnus, who withdrew his bill to create a hybrid J.D. program at Maine Law upon learning a feasibility study was already forthcoming.

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