



Rachel Talbot Ross
Senator, District 28

THE MAINE SENATE
132nd Legislature

3 State House Station
Augusta, Maine 04333

Testimony of Senator Rachel Talbot Ross introducing
**LD 1965, “Resolve, to Establish a Task Force to Create a Court Navigation
Program Plan”**

*Before the Joint Standing Committee on Judiciary
May 19, 2025*

Senator Carney, Representative Kuhn, and distinguished colleagues of the Joint Standing Committee on Judiciary, my name is Rachel Talbot Ross. I represent Senate District 28, which includes part of my hometown of Portland and Peaks Island. I am here today to introduce LD 1965, a “Resolve, to Establish a Task Force to Create a Court Navigation Program Plan.”

Access to justice is a foundational principle of our legal system; yet, for too many Mainers, navigating the court system without the guidance of an attorney is a daunting and often overwhelming experience. The ultimate goal of this effort is to develop a comprehensive court navigation program that provides critical support to self-represented litigants, enabling them to better understand court processes, access necessary forms, and connect with community resources.

However, achieving this vision requires careful planning and thoughtful design to ensure the program is truly responsive to Maine’s unique needs. That is why this resolve first calls for the formation of a task force, bringing together a diverse coalition of experts, including representatives from the University of Maine System, Pine Tree Legal Assistance, Disability Rights Maine, the National Alliance on Mental Illness Maine, 211 Maine, the Department of Health and Human Services, and others. This group will be tasked with examining similar programs from across the country, assessing the specific challenges faced by Maine’s unrepresented litigants, and recommending a model that fits our state’s courts and communities.

In working on this bill, I’ve consulted with the University of Maine and discussed the concept with a representative of the Judicial Branch, both of whom expressed support for this task force. In fact, a pilot program was recently launched in York County that can serve as a model to be further explored.¹

The goal is straightforward but significant: to develop a program that not only provides guidance on court processes and procedures but also connects individuals to essential community-based resources,

¹ *Courthouse Greeter Pilot Program Launching at the York Judicial Center in Biddeford.* (2025, April 30). Courts.maine.gov; Maine Judicial Branch. <https://www.courts.maine.gov/news/article.html?id=13178687>



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such as mental health services, housing support, and employment assistance. This holistic approach acknowledges that the challenges faced by those involved in the court system often extend far beyond their immediate legal concerns.

Additionally, this program would create valuable experiential learning opportunities for social work and law students, allowing them to gain hands-on experience while providing meaningful support to their communities.

This approach reflects the findings of the *Court Navigator Compendium*, a national report authored by Policy Research Associates in partnership with the State Justice Institute. The Compendium provides an overview of 18 court navigation programs operating in 22 states across the United States and highlights the critical role these programs play in connecting people to behavioral health, economic, and social services.²

The task force will have the benefit of insights from a diverse array of existing court navigator models, which have been extensively studied and documented. For example, the Policy Research Associates' *Resource Guide on Court Navigator Programs* describes five distinct models observed during site visits between November 2023 and May 2024.³ These include:

1. The Court Navigator in Buncombe County, North Carolina
2. The Court Clinician in Chesterfield County, Virginia
3. The Social Work and Court Navigators in Franklin County, Ohio
4. Recovery Support Navigators with Project NORTH in Massachusetts
5. Criminal Justice Liaisons in Tennessee

Additionally, this program would create valuable experiential learning opportunities for social work and law students, allowing them to gain hands-on experience while providing meaningful support to their communities.

Court navigation programs also provide significant benefits to the courts themselves by reducing court costs, easing the strain on court staff, and improving case processing efficiency. By bridging the gap

² Zottola, S. A., Morrissey, B., Massey, I., Hope, E.C., & Desmarais, S. L. (2023). *A national compendium of court navigation and support services*. Troy, NY: Policy Research Associates. <https://www.prainc.com/resource-library>

³ Zottola, S. A., Morrissey, B., Massey, I., & Desmarais, S. L. (2024). *A resource guide on court navigator programs: Providing connections and support across the legal and behavioral health systems*. Policy Research Associates. <https://www.prainc.com/resource-library>.



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between the legal and behavioral health systems, these programs can reduce miscommunication, streamline service delivery, and prevent people from “falling through the cracks” by ensuring warm handoffs to appropriate services.

By establishing this task force, Maine will take an important step toward making our courts more accessible and responsive to the needs of all residents, ensuring that our justice system lives up to its promise of fairness and equity. The task force will be required to deliver its findings and recommendations to the Joint Standing Committee on Judiciary by December 3, 2025, including a detailed program plan and any necessary legislative changes. This will provide the committee with the insights needed to act on this issue, and this committee would then be able to report out legislation in the Second Regular Session of the 132nd Legislature, ensuring that this effort moves swiftly from planning to implementation. Finally, I would like to note that the emergency clause is no longer necessary, and I would support the committee's removal of the clause if desired.

I urge you to support this resolve and to work with me in making our court system a more welcoming and navigable place for every Mainer. Thank you for your consideration. I would be happy to answer any questions you may have.



Overview of Court Navigator Programs

Court Navigator—Buncombe County, North Carolina

In Buncombe County, North Carolina, a single court navigator offers services to anyone coming into the Buncombe County Courthouse. The navigator is employed by Goodwill Industries International Inc., but works in the courthouse full-time. He has a desk just past the main courthouse entrance and provides most services in the lobby. Services include answering questions, providing directions to get around the courthouse, and connecting people to resources available in the courthouse and in the community. In general, the navigator's interactions with people are brief. He does not collect information or engage in any follow-ups. For these reasons, the Buncombe County court navigator represents a **light-engagement, single-navigator model** of court navigation.

Court Clinician—Chesterfield County, Virginia

In Chesterfield County, Virginia, a single court clinician offers services to anyone coming into the Chesterfield General District Court, with a focus on those with mental health needs. The clinician is employed by Chesterfield Behavioral Health but works in the courthouse full-time. He has an office near the court entrance in the same hallway as the General District courtrooms. The clinician answers people's questions and addresses concerns they may have about the court process. He also meets with people to help them comply with court-ordered treatment, connects them to behavioral health providers in the community, and provides direct therapeutic interventions himself, as he is a Licensed Professional Counselor. The frequency of interactions with people varies. He may meet with a person once or repeatedly over several weeks or months. The clinician also collaborates with court actors by conducting mental health evaluations or consulting on behavioral health factors relevant to a case. In this way, the Chesterfield County court clinician represents a **heavy-engagement, single-navigator model** of court navigation that emphasizes mental health needs and collaboration with court actors.

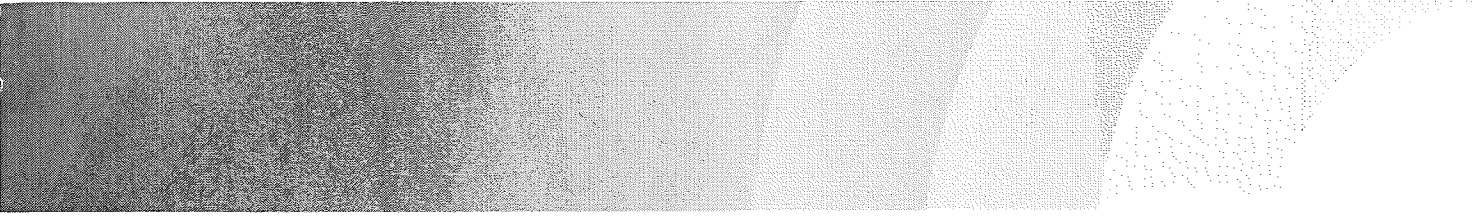


Social Work and Court Navigators—Franklin County, Ohio

In Franklin County, Ohio, one social work navigator and three court navigators offer services for anyone coming to eviction court within the Franklin County Municipal Court. All navigators are court-employed and have a table located at the entrance to the eviction court floor and a private office on that floor. They spend most of their time providing services in the lobby and hallway outside the eviction courtrooms. The social work navigator is a licensed social worker and primarily provides crisis counseling in the courthouse and connects people to resources in the community. The court navigators primarily direct people around the eviction court floor, answer questions about the court process, and connect people to resources available in the courthouse. The social work navigator typically interacts with people once to provide crisis counseling, discuss needs, and connect people to community resources. She does not specifically engage in follow-ups, though she invites people to contact her again if needed. The court navigator's interactions with people are brief. They do not collect information or engage in any follow-ups. In this way, the Franklin County navigators represent a **light-engagement, multi-navigator model** of court navigation.

Recovery Support Navigators—Massachusetts

In Massachusetts, 14 recovery support navigators provide services in 12 counties across the state. The Navigators operate in District, Juvenile, Probate & Family, Superior, Housing, and Boston Municipal Courts. Generally, each navigator is assigned to one county. They provide services to anyone coming into the courts with a focus on those with substance use needs. The navigators are employed by behavioral health agencies and work full-time in courthouses or community resource centers. In courthouses, they have tables in highly visible areas and a private space to hold meetings. Navigators answer people's questions and concerns about the court process and connect them with behavioral health, housing, and social service-related resources in the community. Typically, navigators have an initial meeting with a person and then follow up twice to ensure the person is successfully



connected to resources. Navigators may additionally meet with a person multiple times over several weeks or months when necessary to ensure connection to services. The navigators may also collaborate with court actors by providing them with information on the status of a person's receipt of treatment if the person has given them permission to do so. In this way, the Massachusetts recovery support navigators represent a **moderate-engagement, single-navigator model** of court navigation that emphasizes substance use needs and some collaboration with court actors.

Criminal Justice Liaisons—Tennessee

In Tennessee, 34 criminal justice liaisons provide services in all 95 counties across the state. The liaisons work in criminal, municipal, county, and circuit courthouses and in county jails. Generally, each Liaison is assigned to a few counties. They provide services for anyone involved in the legal system, focusing on those with mental health needs. Employed by behavioral health agencies, the liaisons travel between courthouses, jails, and community locations throughout the week rather than being stationed in one place. Liaisons meet with people to discuss their needs and connect them with behavioral health, housing, and social service-related resources in the community. The liaisons frequently engage with people incarcerated in jail to assist in developing a release plan that includes connection to treatment and supports successful integration into the community. Liaisons typically meet with a person just one time, though they may meet repeatedly over several weeks or months when necessary to ensure connection to services. The liaisons may also collaborate with jail and court actors by providing them with information on the status of a person's treatment receipt. In this way, the Tennessee criminal justice liaisons represent a **moderate-engagement, single-navigator model** of court navigation that emphasizes mental health needs and jail release planning.