

State of Maine
132nd Legislature
Joint Standing Committees on Appropriations and Financial Affairs and on the Judiciary

Testimony of Charles F. Dingman
For the Justice Action Group Legislative Committee

Providing Further Information Regarding

LD 2212, An Act Making Unified Supplemental Appropriations and Allocations for the Expenditures of State Government, General Fund and Other Funds, and Changing Certain Provisions of the Law Necessary to the Proper Operations of State Government for the Fiscal Years Ending June 30, 2026 and June 30, 2027

February 27, 2026

Senator Rotundo, Representative Gattine, Senator Carney, Representative Kuhn, and members of the Joint Standing Committees on Appropriations and Financial Affairs and the Judiciary, I am Charlie Dingman, a lawyer with the firm of Kozak & Gayer. I am here today in my role as a volunteer with the Legislative Committee of the Justice Action Group.¹

As you have heard from Justice Mead and others today, the budget that would result from enactment of this bill without modification would dramatically reduce access to justice in civil matters beginning on July 1 of this year. As the bill currently stands, **funding for civil legal aid would drop by \$3 million** in the second year of this biennium. This would leave at least 5000 more Maine households without a lawyer to help them navigate life-changing legal challenges -- such as evictions and other housing crises, domestic violence, child protection and custody issues, access to health care or other essential assistance with food and other necessities, and many more – you’ve heard some of the stories today. Civil legal aid makes the difference in many cases between disaster and the opportunity to thrive.

Maine’s system of civil legal aid is a well-coordinated, innovative, and hardworking network of legal service providers, funded through a patchwork of sources, including generous donations from private practice lawyers, surcharges on court fees, interest on lawyer trust accounts, and the like. The funds provided by the Legislature in recent years have been crucial to inching our state closer to providing access to justice in civil matters for everyone. In the current fiscal year, \$4.3 million has been provided through General Fund appropriations, but next year this will drop to \$1.3 million unless the Legislature acts to continue the \$3 million that was only appropriated on a one-time basis last year. Sustaining the current funding level in FY 2026-27 will:

- ✓ Preserve existing legal aid capacity and **prevent a 28% reduction** in civil legal aid capacity;
- ✓ Avoid reversing the recent progress Maine has made toward an adequate number of legal aid attorneys. The National Justice Index calls for 10 legal aid lawyers for every 10,000 people with low incomes. For many years, Maine hovered significantly below 2 lawyers per 10,000. Thanks to funding increases by the Legislature over the past 3 years, Maine currently has increased that number to

¹ The Justice Action Group is chaired by Associated Maine Supreme Court Justice Andrew Mead and is described more fully here: <https://justicemaine.org/grants-and-programs/justice-action-group/>

over 3 lawyers per 10,000, a heartening increase moving us a little closer to access for all. If the \$3 million drop occurs, that the number would again fall well below 2 per 10,000.

Inaction will force Maine to take a big step backward in providing access to justice. Please do not let that happen.

Thank you for your time and attention today. I would be pleased to respond to any questions now, in your work sessions, or via the contact information provided below.

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