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Judicial Branch testimony in favor of LD 1924, An Act to Expand Access to Justice in Rural Maine through Legal Education:

Senator Rafferty, Representative Brennan, members of the Joint Standing Committee on Education and Cultural Affairs, my name is Julie Finn and I represent the Judicial Branch. I would like to provide testimony in support of this bill.

LD 1924 would provide the funding to open a satellite branch of the Cumberland Legal Aid Clinic, affiliated with the University of Maine School of Law, in Aroostook County. The Cumberland Legal Aid Clinic is a small legal services provider, in which Maine people are represented by “student attorneys,” who are law students specially licensed by the state to provide legal assistance to low-income parties. The student attorneys are supervised by fully licensed attorney faculty members. They represent individuals in four southern Maine counties in several case types including civil (e.g., protection from abuse), juvenile, and family law matters.

There is a great need for an expansion of civil legal services for those who cannot afford an attorney throughout Maine. A majority of family law matters and protection from abuse cases proceed with one or more parties unrepresented. This is particularly acute in rural areas of Maine where the numbers of practicing attorneys are dwindling.

Navigating the court system is very challenging for an unrepresented person. For example, that person does not know what type of complaint to file; what to say in the complaint; what court to file it in; what supporting documents to provide; who to serve; and which issues can be raised in a particular case type. Our court clerks are frequently asked these questions. They are well trained but are not able to dispense legal advice and thus cannot answer such inquiries. An attorney, however, could very quickly assist an unrepresented person in this regard.

The involvement of attorneys in a case makes the case more likely to resolve without the need for a court hearing. The attorneys can narrow the focus on the bottom-line issues and filter

out the cases that may be resolved outside of court. This “issue spotting” helps everyone: the litigants obtain a timely resolution; the court system becomes less clogged with disputes that can be resolved elsewhere; and the law students gain experience.

The amount of money requested in this bill is small compared to the benefits it will reap. A relatively small amount of legal assistance will go a very long way toward helping low-income Mainers get the legal assistance that they need.

Thank you for your consideration.