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**Testimony of Andrea Mancuso, on behalf of the Maine Coalition to End Domestic Violence  
In Support of LD 1924:  
An Act to Expand Access to Justice in Rural Maine through Legal Education  
Wednesday, February 9, 2022**

Senator Rafferty, Representative Brennan, and distinguished members of the Joint Standing Committee on Education and Cultural Affairs, I am writing on behalf of the Maine Coalition to End Domestic Violence (MCEDV)<sup>1</sup> in support of LD 1924, “An Act to Expand Access to Justice in Rural Maine through Legal Education.”

Access to social services, including legal assistance, reduces the probability of future domestic violence.<sup>2</sup> At least one study found that the availability of legal services **in a survivor’s county of residence** was the single greatest factor in reducing the likelihood of abuse.<sup>3</sup> For survivors of abuse in Aroostook County, legal representation is almost always unattainable – particularly for those without significant financial resources – and has been for many years.

Hope and Justice Project (HJP) is the domestic violence resource center serving Aroostook County. HJP advocates provide a broad range of services and supports for survivors, including support and advocacy for survivors who are involved in protection from abuse or family court proceedings in any one of Aroostook County’s five District Courts. In all of Aroostook County, Hope and Justice Project has **one local attorney** who is willing to take cases for a reduced rate representing survivors in civil court.

Unlike Cumberland or York Counties, where there are hundreds of attorneys whom advocates can ask to take a compelling case pro bono or for a reduced rate, attorneys are so limited in number in Aroostook County that they have all they can do to handle the cases in which clients are able to pay for their services. To be clear, there is nowhere near enough attorneys in Maine statewide to adequately meet the need that survivors have for

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<sup>1</sup> MCEDV represents a membership of the eight regional domestic violence resource centers across Maine as well as the Immigrant Resource Center of Maine. Last year, our programs provided services to more than 12,000 survivors of domestic abuse and violence and their children in our state.

<sup>2</sup> Denise A. Grab & Jennifer S. Rosenberg, *Supporting Survivors: The Economic Benefits of Providing Civil Legal Assistance to Survivors of Domestic Violence*, Institute for Policy Integrity, New York University School of Law (2015).

<sup>3</sup> Amy Farmer & Jill Tiefenthaler, *Explaining the Recent Decline in Domestic Violence*, 21 *Contemporary Econ. Pol’y* 158, 167 (2003)

representation in civil courts. But that problem is particularly acute in Northern Maine's rural communities.

As noted in the 2016 report, "Economic Impact of Civil Legal Services in Maine," more than 80% of the recipients of civil legal aid in Maine have an annual household income of less than \$25,000; 2/3 of the recipients are women; and more than 30% are aged 65 and older.<sup>4</sup> These are Maine's most vulnerable communities – communities in which survivors exist in significant numbers. However, survivors in Aroostook County rarely benefit from the same impact that legal services representation has in other counties because civil legal services are not staffed the same in rural Maine as elsewhere in the state. There are a limited number of staff overall, and that limited staff covers several courts spread out over a significant area of the state. Expanding the Cumberland Legal Aid Clinic ("Clinic") into Aroostook County is a creative solution, and one that merits strong support.

The student representation program through the Clinic has been an asset to survivors and the advocacy programs that support them in Southern Maine. Each week, Clinic students, under the supervision of faculty, represent survivors seeking protection from abuse orders in Lewiston District Court, working collaboratively with our advocates. This representation often results in achieving consent agreements, increasing the chances a survivor has an order that fully addresses their needs while ensuring a survivor does not have to face the abuser in a lengthy and emotional hearing. Where a case does require a hearing, trained students are able to represent survivors, greatly increasing the likelihood that an order will be granted. And the Clinic's program has also paired student attorneys with survivors for representation in other types of cases as well – cases where other legal services providers were unable to take the case due to a conflict of interest or capacity constraints.

Beyond helping to fill the critical need for representation that currently exists, expansion of the Clinic will also have two additional benefits: creating opportunities for those attorneys who gain experience practicing in Aroostook County to return to rural Maine after graduation, addressing the problem of an aging bar there; and increasing the number of attorneys practicing anywhere in Maine with training on and experience with providing trauma-informed legal services. The Clinic's faculty represent some of Maine's best attorneys – with incredible insight into the realities of Maine's most vulnerable communities. Clinic students learn how to represent, counsel, and provide advocacy for populations that come to them with a multitude of needs and challenges. This is a skill set not otherwise taught in law school. By expanding the Clinic program, Maine would not only be creating significantly more opportunities for access to legal representation in rural Maine in the short-term, but also creating a better legal community in the long-term.

Thank you for the opportunity to be heard on these important issues. MCEDV and our member programs hope you will give your strong support to this proposal.

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<sup>4</sup> Todd Gabe, Ph.D., *Economic Impact of Civil Legal Aid Services in Maine* (2016).



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