

Testimony in Support of LD 1022

An Act to Protect and Increase Access to Justice in Civil Legal Matters for Persons with Low Incomes

Sponsor: Senator Carney

April 17th, 2025

Senator Carney, Representative Khun, and honorable members of the Judiciary Committee:

My name is Ruben Torres, and I serve as the Advocacy, Communications, and Policy Manager for the Maine Immigrants' Rights Coalition (MIRC). MIRC is a network of over 100 organizations across the state working collaboratively to advance the rights and well-being of Maine's immigrant and refugee communities. We are writing today in strong support of LD 1022, An Act To Support Access to Justice through State Funding for Civil Legal Services.

This bill is about recognizing the indispensable role civil legal services play in maintaining a just and equitable society—particularly for low-income Mainers, new arrivals, and communities navigating complicated systems of law and bureaucracy.

Every day, our coalition members encounter individuals and families who face legal challenges with life-altering consequences—housing evictions, domestic violence, wage theft, family reunification struggles, or complex immigration proceedings—all without adequate access to an attorney. The truth is, even when laws are designed to protect people, those protections are meaningless if you can't access or understand them. Civil legal aid organizations like the Immigrant Legal Advocacy Project (ILAP) and Pine Tree Legal Assistance serve as lifelines in these moments, ensuring people are not left to navigate a confusing and often unforgiving system on their own.

But these services are critically underfunded. We have all read the headlines in recent months about the shortage of lawyers in the criminal justice system. The shortage of legal representation is particularly acute for our immigrant and asylum-seeking neighbors, many of whom are navigating some of the most complicated legal systems—immigration court, in particular—without the right to a court-appointed attorney. For an asylum seeker, the stakes are as high as life or death. Yet the vast majority must plead their case alone.

LD 1022 begins to address this injustice in a structural way. It provides for a much-needed increase in the ongoing appropriation to the Judicial Department for civil legal services and establishes a baseline of stable, recurring funding through the Maine Civil Legal Services Fund. Just as importantly, it introduces accountability and transparency mechanisms, requiring biennial legislative hearings and recommendations, and annual reporting from the Civil Legal Services Fund Commission.

This bill is not a one-time fix. It is an investment in the long-term integrity of our justice system and a recognition that civil legal services are essential.

We urge you to vote **Ought to Pass** on LD 1022 and to affirm Maine's commitment to a justice system that is accessible, equitable, and responsive to the needs of all its residents.

Thank you for your leadership and your commitment to justice for all.

Sincerely,
Ruben Torres
Advocacy, Communications, and Policy Manager
Maine Immigrants' Rights Coalition (MIRC)
rtorres@maineimmigrantrights.org