

Testimony in Support of LD 1766 An Act to Incorporate Probate Judges into the Maine Judicial Branch.

To:
Senator Anne Carney, Chair
Joint Standing Committee on Judiciary

Dear Senator Carney and members of the Joint Standing Committee on Judiciary:

My name is Roseanna Belanger. I live in Presque Isle, Maine, and I am the former Chair of the Board of Speaking Up for Us (SUFU), a statewide self-advocacy organization for people with intellectual and developmental disabilities. I am writing in support of LD 1766.

This bill matters to me because of my personal experience navigating the probate court system as a person with a disability. I previously sought and obtained guardianship of myself, and I found the process to be confusing, lengthy, and difficult to access. Even getting a court date was challenging, and understanding what paperwork was required for my probate appointment was not clear.

One of the most difficult parts of the process was understanding the paperwork and the options available to me. At the time, I did not know that I could have been appointed an attorney at no cost. As a result, I paid out-of-pocket expenses that I later learned I may not have needed to pay. I was essentially left in the dark about important procedural protections and supports that should have been clearly explained from the beginning.

After my guardianship was approved, I learned that there were alternative processes I could have used that would have reduced both confusion and financial burden. I strongly believe that other people with disabilities who are trying to obtain guardianship of themselves deserve clearer guidance and better access to information than I had.

I was fortunate that the probate judge in my county was respectful, understanding, and willing to listen to my perspective. I was also familiar with the judge from prior years, which may have helped my experience. However, despite that positive interaction, the overall process was still frustrating due to paperwork issues and long delays.

My family and I waited nearly a year to receive a court date. During that time, we also had to wait for an appointed investigator to work with us as part of the guardianship process. These delays created stress and uncertainty and made it difficult to address important life decisions in a timely way.

From my understanding, county probate courts often have very limited availability, sometimes only one day a month or week, to handle matters such as guardianship, name changes, estates, and other critical issues. For people like me, waiting close to a year to be heard is unreasonable and creates unnecessary hardship.

I believe that incorporating probate judges into the Maine Judicial Branch would improve fairness, consistency, and efficiency. It could allow for more frequent court dates, clearer procedures, and better access for people with disabilities who need timely decisions affecting their lives. Based on my experience, this change would help others avoid the frustration and barriers that I faced.

I respectfully urge you to support LD 1766 so that Maine's probate system becomes more accessible, understandable, and equitable for everyone.

Thank you for taking the time to consider my testimony and for your work to make Maine's court system fair, accessible, and respectful for all people.

Sincerely,
Roseanna Belanger, Presque Isle Maine