

TESTIMONY OF MEAGAN SWAY

**LD 1034 – Ought to Pass**

**An Act To Provide Funding To Support the Permanent Commission on the Status of Racial, Indigenous and Maine Tribal Populations**

JOINT STANDING COMMITTEE ON STATE AND LOCAL GOVERNMENT

April 14, 2021

Senator Baldacci, Representative Matlack and distinguished members of the Joint Standing Committee on State and Local Government, greetings. My name is Meagan Sway, and I am policy director of the American Civil Liberties Union of Maine, a statewide organization committed to advancing and preserving civil liberties guaranteed by the Maine and U.S. Constitutions. On behalf of our members, I am here to testify in support of LD 1034. This bill would provide crucial funding for the Permanent Commission on the Status of Racial, Indigenous and Maine Tribal Populations (the “Permanent Commission”) so that it can afford the staff and overhead necessary to carry out its statutory duties.

Earlier this session, this committee took an important step toward creating a more just and equal Maine by supporting LD 2, which starts the process of implementing racial impact statements on pending legislation. We now urge you to take another step forward by funding the crucial work of the Permanent Commission.

The ACLU of Maine is proud to have been part of a large group of coalitions that advocated for the formation of the Permanent Commission two years ago. We supported its formation because there was no government body tasked with examining racial disparities across all government systems, or to advise lawmakers about how to improve outcomes for historically disadvantaged communities in our state. The legislature responded, creating the Permanent Commission to “promote, implement and coordinate programs that create and improve opportunities and incorporate the goal of eliminating racial disparities for historically disadvantaged racial, indigenous and tribal populations in the State [of Maine].” 5 M.R.S.A. §25001.

In less than two years of existence, the Permanent Commission has done important work on a shoestring budget of \$50,000, that was supplied by the governor's office. Last summer, the commissioners—who are all volunteers with other jobs and responsibilities—and interested legislators analyzed the more than 400 bills that were carried over when the legislature adjourned early because of COVID-19. The Commission came up with a list of 46 bills that would most advance racial equity in our state.

This was a herculean effort, done with little staff support and hundreds of volunteer hours. It was not an effort that is sustainable without significant aid. In order for the Permanent Commission to live up to its full potential, we cannot rely on volunteers or private organizations lending their staff for temporary support. It must have staff and it must be able to cover costs of basic operations like a website and travel expenses. The Permanent Commission must be funded so that it can spend its time on its statutory duties rather than cobbling together volunteers and funding. With dedicated funding, it could hold hearings in different parts of the state, examining the ways in which systemic racism has affected Maine's people from Madawaska to Berwick, advise all three branches of government, or put forth legislation to address systemic racism in our state, among other things.

We are appreciative that the 130<sup>th</sup> Legislature has made a commitment to examine and address the racial disparities we see in housing, employment, education, wealth, poverty, and interactions with the criminal legal system. In order to cement this commitment, the legislature ought to fund the Permanent Commission on the Status of Racial, Indigenous, and Maine Tribal Populations. Please vote ought to pass on this important legislation.