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**Testimony of Joby Thoyalil, Maine Equal Justice**  
**In support of LD 1034, An Act To Provide Funding To Support the Permanent Commission on the Status of Racial, Indigenous and Maine Tribal Populations**  
April 14, 2021

Good morning Senator Baldacci, Representative Matlack and members of the Joint Standing Committee on State and Local Government. My name is Joby Thoyalil and I am a senior policy advocate at Maine Equal Justice, a nonprofit legal aid organization working to increase economic security, opportunity, and equity for people in Maine. I also have the honor of serving as a commissioner on the Permanent Commission on the Status of Racial, Indigenous and Maine Tribal Populations representing an organization with expertise in legal and policy matters related to public benefit programs that assists individuals with low incomes. I also serve on the commission's legislative subcommittee and I help to coordinate the Maine Coalition on Racial Equity (CORE). I am testifying in strong support of LD 1034.

**Background on the Permanent Commission**

The Permanent Commission on the Status of Racial, Indigenous and Maine Tribal Populations was formed through legislation in 2019 to examine racial disparities across all systems in Maine and improve opportunities and outcomes for historically disadvantaged racial, indigenous and tribal populations in the State.

It is an independent government entity that is made up of a diverse group of fifteen Mainers, each of whom bring a combination of expertise through their lived experience, their professional backgrounds, or a combination of both. Commissioners are appointed by the Governor, the President of the Maine Senate, and the Speaker of the Maine House.

The work of the commission can be divided into 3 pillars: (1) advisory to the three branches of government (2) furthering research, data collection and analysis, and (3) public education and engagement.

## **The State Does Not Sustainably Fund the Permanent Commission**

The Permanent Commission received a \$500 allocation for 2020 and very limited administrative support from the Department of Labor. Since then, Governor Mills provided the commission with a one-time amount of \$50,000 from her discretionary fund and the commission has received a small philanthropic grant. The commission has also benefitted from temporary staff support donated by Volunteers of America: Northern New England as well as support from a graduate intern. In the summer of 2020, we had temporary support from legislative caucus staff.

While we are grateful for all of the resources listed above, they have not been sufficient in supporting the work of the commission and they represent a patchwork of mostly one-time or temporary resources that came together in an unpredictable manner. That is why the commission submitted this bill requesting sustainable funding to hire staff and to fully fund the vitally important work that falls within the scope of this commission.

## **The Commission Has a Large Scope of Work**

Racial disparities are the result of centuries of policy choices which have created a system that disadvantages people of color and ultimately holds us all back. Centuries of discrimination can't be undone overnight. That is precisely why this commission was established as a "permanent" commission. The amount of commission work required by the statute is significant, but the potential scope of work authorized by the statute is much larger.

For example, statute allows us to be responsive to new needs that arise. Take the events of 2020 - both the COVID-19 pandemic and the protests over police killings of Black people like George Floyd, Breonna Taylor, and Ahmed Aubrey, which opened the eyes of many in Maine to just how pervasive and harmful systemic racism is in our society today. In response to this, the commission responded to a request of legislative leaders to partner with volunteer legislators in examining the outstanding bills from the 129<sup>th</sup> legislature, and to recommend bills which would help improve racial equity in our state. We then issued a report in September with recommendations to the current and future legislatures. Most of those bills we recommended have been reintroduced in some form this session and several have been modified to better target racial disparities, as was recommended by the Permanent Commission.

Since then, we have utilized some of our limited funds to engage in a work planning process that has only made it clearer how much we should be doing toward advancing racial equity, given our role and mission. We have been excited to see that legislators have proposed bills directing the commission to investigate certain topics and we are eager to take on some of that work, but we also know from experience that we will not be able to do so without significantly more resources.

The volunteer members of the commission have been able to accomplish a lot in a short time, but our time, labor, and expertise are not limitless. The September report was only made possible through the temporary assistance of legislative staff. The Governor and the Legislature have referenced the work of the commission and pointed to it as an important tool in addressing racial disparities in our state.

### **LD 1034 Constitutes an Investment in the Eradication of Structural Racism in our State**

It is well established that there are significant racial disparities across systems in Maine and that the State has not previously invested in reducing those disparities at the level we are calling for today. This is not a coincidence. We are calling for a sustained and deliberate commitment to build a just and more equitable Maine. That commitment means investing public funds to address inequalities; allocating public funds in a way that is equitable and informed by communities of color; and funding institutions like the Permanent Commission so that it can fulfill its mission of creating and improving opportunities and eliminating disparities for historically disadvantaged racial, indigenous, and tribal populations in the State.

For these reasons, I urge you to support this bill. Thank you for the opportunity to testify and I would be happy to answer any questions.