

Maine Civil Legal Services Fund Commission

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Maine Civil Legal Services Fund Commission

Report to the Joint Standing Committee on the Judiciary

132nd Legislature, First Regular Session

January 31, 2025

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MAINE CIVIL LEGAL SERVICES FUND COMMISSION

January 31, 2025

Anne Carney, Senate Chair
Amy Kuhn, House Chair
Joint Standing Committee on Judiciary
100 State House Station
Augusta, Maine 04333-0100

RE: 2024 Report of the Maine Civil Legal Services Fund Commission

Dear Senator Carney and Representative Kuhn:

I am pleased to submit the 2024 Annual Report of the Maine Civil Legal Services Fund Commission (MCLSFC) to the Joint Standing Committee on Judiciary, as required by 4 MRSA §18-A.

Edmond J. Bearor, Carol Emery and I were the three Commissioners who oversaw the Maine Civil Legal Services Fund (“Fund”) during this period.

The annual report includes information about the amounts and uses of the funds allocated from the Fund. This compilation includes a report from each of the seven organizations receiving these funds. In 2024, there were three sources of funds pooled in the Fund for distribution to these organizations: the regular pass-through payments made annually pursuant to 4 MRSA §18-A(3-A)(6); distributions from the general fund resulting from the FY 2024 State of Maine budget appropriation for civil legal aid; and a one-time additional budget allocation pursuant to H.P. 163 - LD 258 Chapter 412 PL.

2024 MCLSF Fund Distribution Per 4 MRSA §18-A(3-A)(6)

The total amount distributed in 2024 from regular pass-through payments was \$1,259,447.36. The distributions in 2024 were made according to the following formula and in the following amounts:

Organizations Receiving Regular Pass-Through Funds from Maine Civil Legal Services Fund	% Share of Allocation	Amount Received (\$)
Disability Rights Maine	3.0000	37,783.41
Immigrant Legal Advocacy Project	6.0000	75,566.83
Legal Services for Maine Elders	22.0000	277,078.42

Maine Equal Justice	10.5000	132,241.98
Pine Tree Legal Assistance, Inc.	47.5000	598,237.51
Univ. of Maine/Clinics at Maine Law	6.5000	81,864.08
Volunteer Lawyers Project	4.5000	56,675.13
Total	100.0000	\$1,259,447.36

2024 General Fund Allotment

Beginning in FY 2023, the State of Maine annual budget included an annual allocation of funds from the general fund for civil legal services to benefit organizations that qualify as beneficiaries of the Fund. Payments were distributed according to the same percentage share of allocation of the existing MCLSF funds to seven organizations in CY 2024, totaling \$1,300,000.00, as follows:

Organizations Receiving General Fund Allotment via Maine Civil Legal Services Fund in CY 2024	% Share of Allocation	Amount Received (\$)
Disability Rights Maine	3.0000	39,000.00
Immigrant Legal Advocacy Project	6.0000	78,000.00
Legal Services for Maine Elders	22.0000	286,000.00
Maine Equal Justice	10.5000	136,500.00
Pine Tree Legal Assistance, Inc.	47.5000	617,500.00
Univ. of Maine/Clinics at Maine Law	6.5000	84,500.00
Volunteer Lawyers Project	4.5000	58,500.00
Total	100.0000	\$1,300,000.00

One-Time Additional Budget Allocation of \$4 Million

Pursuant to H.P. 163 - LD 258 Chapter 412 PL, the seven civil legal aid providers receiving allocations via the Fund are scheduled to receive a one-time allocation of \$4 million over FY 2024 and FY 2025. In FY 2024, the distributions were made as follows:

Organizations Receiving One-Time Additional Budget Allocation in CY 2024	% Share of Allocation	Amount Received (\$)
Disability Rights Maine	3.0000	75,000.00
Immigrant Legal Advocacy Project	6.0000	150,000.00
Legal Services for Maine Elders	22.0000	550,000.00
Maine Equal Justice	10.5000	262,500.00
Pine Tree Legal Assistance, Inc.	47.5000	1,187,500.00
Univ. of Maine/Clinics at Maine Law	6.5000	162,500.00
Volunteer Lawyers Project	4.5000	112,500.00
Total	100.0000	\$2,500,000.00

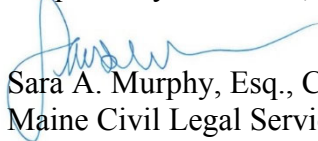
The remaining distribution of \$1.5 million of the one-time allocation of \$4 million will be made in FY 2025.

In total, **\$5,059,447.36** was distributed among seven civil legal services organizations for CY 2024 via the Maine Civil Legal Services Fund, as compared to a total distribution of **\$3,388,135.69** in CY 2023.

The Maine Civil Legal Services Fund plays a critical role in funding access to justice for Maine community members who are low income, elderly, and/or have a disability. As Commissioners, we will continue to monitor the good work performed by these organizations in order to ensure that the allocations from the Fund are used in a manner that will most efficiently and effectively maintain and enhance access to justice in Maine, consistent with the provisions of 4 MRSA §18-A. On behalf of all persons who benefit from this Fund, we thank you for your support.

If you or any members of the Committee have questions, please feel free to contact me. I can be reached at 207.791.1185 or smurphy@pierceatwood.com.

Respectfully submitted,



Sara A. Murphy, Esq., Chair
Maine Civil Legal Services Fund Commission

Enclosure

cc: Edmund J. Bearor, Esq., Commissioner
Hon. Carol R. Emery, Commissioner

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**DISABILITY RIGHTS MAINE
2024 ANNUAL REPORT TO THE
MAINE CIVIL LEGAL SERVICES FUND COMMISSION
January 22, 2025**

I. Overview

Disability Rights Maine (DRM) is Maine’s statewide Protection and Advocacy agency for people with disabilities. Incorporated in 1977 as a private, nonprofit corporation, DRM’s mission is to advance justice and equality by enforcing rights and expanding opportunities for people with disabilities in Maine.

DRM is part of a national network of federally funded and mandated disability rights Protection & Advocacy agencies, which are the largest providers of legally based advocacy and legal services for people with disabilities in the United States. As Maine’s designated P&A, DRM has standing to bring lawsuits on behalf of people with disabilities, can conduct investigations into allegations of abuse and neglect of people with disabilities, and has the statutory authority to gain access to facilities and programs where people with disabilities receive services.

DRM’s priorities focus on ensuring individuals with disabilities are safe from abuse, neglect, and exploitation; are able to live and work in integrated communities and to direct their own lives and services to the maximum extent possible; are not being subjected to unlawful disability-based discrimination; and have access to health care, housing, education, employment and public accommodations.

Using federal and state funds,¹ DRM provides no-cost advocacy and legal services to people with disabilities who have experienced a disability-related violation of their legal or civil rights. DRM currently employs 47 people, 12 of whom are attorneys.

¹ DRM receives funding under nine different federal grants and eight other state and private contracts.

II. Maine Civil Legal Services Funding

DRM has received MCLSF funding to support the provision of legal services to people with disabilities for many years, and received 3% of the Maine Civil Legal Services Fund in 2024. To date, this funding has not been sufficient to fully support a staff attorney position. As a result, DRM used MCLSF funding in 2024, as we have in the past, to supplement our existing funding in cases where the client has a disability, has an income below the federal poverty level, and has experienced disability-based discrimination or a violation of their rights.

At least one in four people in Maine are people with disabilities. Unfortunately, disability and poverty remain closely linked. Between 2017-2021, 52% of working-age Mainers with a disability lived in or near poverty, which was more than twice the rate for Mainers without a disability. Given the significant need for no-cost civil legal services within the disability community, the MCLSF award is essential to maintaining and expanding DRM's ability to provide legal representation to Mainers with disabilities whose incomes are below or around the federal poverty level.

We appreciate the opportunity to highlight some of the important work that DRM attorneys engaged in on behalf of Mainers with disabilities in 2024.

A. Types of cases handled

As outlined in the table below, DRM attorneys handled 698 cases in 2024. Although DRM continues to see an increasing demand for legal services in 2024, two attorneys left employment in 2024, and one attorney was not carrying a full caseload due to other job demands, and so the number of cases handled was a decrease from the 844 cases handled in 2023. Toward the end of 2024, DRM onboarded a new attorney who will be handling discrimination and access cases, and another attorney has increased his caseload focusing on special education.

As outlined in the table below, the majority of individual advocacy cases involved protecting people with disabilities from abuse, neglect, and other rights violations; advocating for community integration; employment-related advocacy; and securing equal access to education for students with disabilities. DRM attorneys also handled a significant number of guardianship cases and housing-related cases.

While case numbers rose in many areas, the most significant increases in 2024 were in the areas of education and government services and public accommodations. Requests for assistance with education-related matters continue to rise. DRM also handled a significant number of cases involving individuals seeking to terminate, modify, or avoid guardianships.

2024 Attorney Cases Handled
Case Problem Area (Based on Total # of Active Client Cases)

Abuse, Neglect and Other Rights Violations.....	86
Assistive Technology	34
Beneficiaries of Social Security	6
Community Integration	242
Due Process	12
Education	145
Employment.....	20
Government Services & Public Accommodations	38
Guardianship.....	88
Housing.....	26
Vocational Rehabilitation	1
Total.....	698

Please refer to the [Appendix](#) for selected case narratives for cases closed in 2024.

B. Number of people served

DRM attorneys provided direct representation in 698 cases to 646 individuals with disabilities in 2024. DRM non-attorney advocates, who are supervised and supported by attorneys, provided services to an additional 520 Mainers with disabilities. In total, DRM provided direct advocacy services to 1,118 Maine citizens with disabilities in 2024.

In addition, when DRM is unable to provide direct advocacy services for various reasons, individuals seeking assistance will receive information and referral services. An additional 1,823 individuals were served in this manner.

Although this report is focused on the individual legal advocacy provided by DRM attorneys in 2024, it is worth noting that DRM attorneys and advocates engaged in a significant amount of work that is not captured here. DRM attorneys and advocates were: a) conducting extensive outreach to people with disabilities in locations throughout the state; b) conducting monitoring visits in residential treatment facilities, hospitals, juvenile justice facilities, and other places where people with disabilities live and/or receive services; c) serving on boards and commissions; d) providing training and technical assistance on the legal rights of people with disabilities to individuals with disabilities, service providers, state employees, and the private bar; e) educating policymakers about issues impacting people with disabilities; f) speaking to the press on issues related to disability; and g) engaging in systemic advocacy efforts. During the 2024 federal fiscal year, DRM attorneys and advocates conducted 349

monitoring/outreach events, reaching 11,653 people and 135 training events reaching 3,508 people.

C. Demographic information about people served

Demographic information regarding the cases handled by DRM attorneys in 2024 is included below. This data covers the total number of unique clients with active service requests in 2024 where an attorney was the primary assigned staff.

Age:

Birth – 18.....	173
19 – 30.....	139
31 – 40.....	100
41 – 50.....	83
51 – 60.....	71
61 – 70.....	49
71 & Over.....	31
Total.....	646

Ethnicity/Race:

Hispanic/Latino.....	14
American Indian/Alaskan Native	11
Asian.....	6
Black/African American.....	10
White.....	514
Two or More Races.....	25
Ethnicity/Race Unknown	66
Total.....	646

Gender:

Female.....	300
Male.....	332
Non-Binary.....	10
Unknown/Declines to Respond	4
Total.....	646

Primary Disability:

Absence of Extremities.....	3
Autism.....	123
Auto-Immune	1
Blindness.....	11
Brain Injury	28

Cerebral Palsy.....	12
Deaf-Blind	1
Deafness	4
Epilepsy	1
Intellectual Disability.....	240
Mental Illness	167
Multiple Sclerosis.....	1
Muscular/Skeletal Impairment	3
Neurological Impairment	23
Orthopedic/Physical Impairment	17
Speech Impairments.....	3
Spina Bifida	1
Tourette Syndrome.....	1
Visual Impairment (not Blind).....	1
Other.....	5
Total.....	646

Income:

100% FPL.....	398
125% FPL.....	65
Over 125%	91
Unknown.....	144
Total.....	698

D. Geographic area actually served

DRM has a statewide service area. In 2024, DRM provided legal representation to Mainers with disabilities in all sixteen of Maine’s counties. See below for additional information regarding the geographic distribution of matters handled by attorneys.

County:

Androscoggin.....	95
Aroostook.....	24
Cumberland.....	179
Franklin.....	11
Hancock.....	19
Kennebec.....	71
Knox	25
Lincoln	17
Oxford	20
Penobscot.....	75

Piscataquis	6
Sagadahoc	15
Somerset	16
Waldo	28
Washington.....	21
York.....	75
Out-of-State	1
Total.....	698

E. Status of matters handled, including whether they are complete or open

DRM had 698 active attorney cases in 2024. During 2024, 405 cases were opened and assigned to attorneys, and 506 attorney cases were closed. In addition, there were also 644 active matters handled by non-attorney advocates in 2024, provided with the support and under the supervision of DRM attorneys.

F. Whether and to what extent the organization has complied with its proposal submitted to the Commission

DRM used MCLSF funding in 2024, as we have in the past, to supplement our existing funding in cases where the client has a disability, has an income below or around the federal poverty level, and has experienced disability-based discrimination or a violation of their rights. The MCLSF funding helps expand our ability to serve Mainers with disabilities who are unable to otherwise access legal representation.

DRM complied with the terms of the award by using MCLSF funding to pay staff attorney salaries to represent Mainers with disabilities with incomes below or around the federal poverty level, and not for any other expenses such as administrative costs, support staff salaries, or non-attorney advocate salaries. This allowed us to be as flexible and as broad as possible in using the MCLSF allocation.

G. Outcome measurements used to determine compliance

The case numbers and other data included above demonstrate compliance with MCLSF requirements. DRM served an increasing number of Mainers with disabilities in 2024, and we delivered these services statewide, serving individuals in every Maine county.

In addition, when DRM closes a case, the reason for closing is documented and reported out as required by various grants. For the 2024 attorney cases reported here, 68% were resolved partially or completely in the client’s favor. Of the balance of those cases, 19% were closed because either the situation changed and the client no

longer needed legal assistance or because the client was not responsive. Less than 3% of cases were closed because no issues were resolved for the client.

Every year, DRM prepares comprehensive program reports for our federal funders, called Program Performance Reports (PPRs). In these detailed reports, DRM outlines all of its activities in each of the programs, including case and non-case activity and explains how our actions furthered the priorities DRM has established for each of its programs. DRM has similar reporting requirements related to state and private contracts. All of these compliance and outcome measures are also applied to cases that are partially supported by MCLSF funds.

H. Unmet and underserved needs

DRM, like all other civil legal service providers, receives far more requests for assistance than we are able to accept. We must turn down approximately 70% of the requests we receive for direct advocacy assistance. We continue to see significant unmet needs in the areas of education, guardianship, and housing, discussed in more detail below.

Education-Related Advocacy: DRM has two full-time education attorney positions. Even with two dedicated attorneys, DRM receives many more calls for educational advocacy than we are able to provide, and the need for educational advocacy appears to be growing exponentially. As schools struggle with staffing challenges, the needs of many students with disabilities are simply not being met. When students are not getting the supports they need, this can occasionally lead to behaviors that interfere with their ability to access their education, and many schools resort to suspending, expelling, or otherwise removing students from school. Students with disabilities are entitled to services to address disability-related behaviors so they can access equal educational opportunities. DRM prioritizes cases where students are excluded from school for all or part of their day, and there is such significant demand for representation in those situations that they comprise the vast majority of our education docket. School exclusions have significant impacts on the students themselves, but these impacts quickly spread to the entire family, especially for families already struggling to make ends meet. It is unfortunately not uncommon for a prolonged school exclusion to result in a parent losing their ability to work, which can result in housing instability and food insecurity for the entire family. We continue to see a growing need for this vitally important work.

Guardianship Defense/Termination: DRM attorneys continue to represent adults seeking to avoid, terminate, or limit guardianships, to and restore their basic rights in Maine probate courts. DRM issued a report in October 2023 that analyzed three years' worth of guardianship data, which showed that approximately 75% of

Respondents go through legal guardianship proceedings without legal representation. DRM about 2-3 attorneys at any given time who have open cases representing Respondents in guardianship matters, and we resolved approximately 17 guardianship matters via direct representation in 2024. When DRM cannot accept a case for direct representation, we provide the individual with information on their right to a court-appointed attorney. There remains a significant shortage of attorneys who represent Respondents in guardianship matters to meet the need.

Housing-Related Advocacy: DRM does not currently have an attorney dedicated to housing cases. Instead, attorneys across DRM represent clients in disability-related housing matters. Although we have successfully advocated for clients (see case examples in Appendix), we receive many more calls for assistance with housing issues than we are able to fulfill. We are also seeing an increasing number of requests for assistance from individuals who are at significant risk of losing their housing for reasons unrelated to disability. While we refer those cases to Pine Tree Legal Assistance, we know the demand for housing-related advocacy far outpaces our collective ability to meet it.

**DISABILITY RIGHTS MAINE
2022 ANNUAL REPORT TO THE
MAINE CIVIL LEGAL SERVICES FUND COMMISSION
January 13, 2023**

APPENDIX

Selected Narratives for Cases Closed in 2024

DRM helps client secure termination of guardianship and conservatorship.

DRM received several reportable events regarding a 30-year-old man with an intellectual disability who was under his mother's guardianship and conservatorship, and had issues with her violating his rights, specifically his rights related to his personal possessions, internet usage, and how he was choosing to spend his money. After attempts to discuss the situation with the guardian did not yield any results, the client requested assistance with terminating the guardianship/conservatorship. The DRM attorney represented the client in filing for termination. At the hearing, the guardian strongly opposed the termination and both sides presented their evidence. The client had the testimony support of his community case manager, community case manager supervisor, and his support staff. After waiting almost five months, the judge issued his written decision terminating both the guardianship and conservatorship due to less restrictive alternatives being available to support the client.

DRM successfully assists client in defending against a petition for adult guardianship through less restrictive alternatives.

A 53-year-old woman with an intellectual disability contacted DRM requesting an attorney to represent her in her defense of a guardianship matter. The woman's out-of-state family member had petitioned for guardianship based largely on her concern that the woman's provider was in declining health. A DRM attorney met with the woman and her supports, reviewed records, and determined that guardianship was unwarranted, as the woman had been successfully using Supported Decision-Making and an Advance Directive to secure support when making difficult healthcare decisions. During the course of the matter, the attorney helped the woman advocate for the support that she wanted, represented her at a hearing and multiple court conferences, completed formal mediation, successfully secured the mediator's recommendation against guardianship, and finally petitioned the court to dismiss the guardianship matter altogether. Because of DRM's legal representation, our client retained the ability to make her own decisions. The DRM attorney also drafted and helped the woman complete the amended Advance Directive and provided copies of the amended Advance Directive to all of her medical providers.

DRM assists man in terminating guardianship and accessing review of representative payee by the Social Security Administration. A 29-year-old man with an intellectual disability contacted DRM seeking assistance with terminating his guardianship. The man's co-guardians were divided on the issue, with one guardian not actively involved in his life. A DRM attorney petitioned the court for the termination of the man's full guardianship. Eventually, both guardians supported the termination. As a result of DRM's representation, the guardianship was successfully terminated. Additionally, the attorney helped the client address potential issues with the management of his Social Security income by his representative payee and ensured all of the man's providers recognized the termination order. Now, as his own guardian, the man is actively securing affordable housing and plans to live in his own apartment soon.

DRM secures free appropriate public education for previously segregated student. Our client was a 19-year-old high school student with a neurological condition that, among other things, prevents him from being able to speak. While representing him in a separate case to obtain an appropriate AAC evaluation and speech-generating-device, DRM discovered that he had been languishing in a functional life skills classroom for years, where he had received inappropriate and insufficient educational evaluations; dire educational programming that reflected abysmally low expectations; no prior AT services at all; and minimal opportunities for any instruction whatsoever. DRM represented the family in filing a complaint for a due process hearing with the Maine Department of Education, alleging a violation of our client's federally protected right to receive a free appropriate public education. Over the course of mediation and protracted intensive negotiations—which resulted in a successful settlement agreement—DRM achieved the development of an Individual Education Program that reflects, going forward, appropriately ambitious functional academic and communication goals that prepare our client to engage in more demanding transitional programming in pursuit of meaningful occupation in the community. DRM secured ongoing expert educational consultation for the staff and school district to directly support developing and implementing our client's IEPs; expert transition planning assessments and ongoing consultation by a leading transition specialist in the State; and the district's commitment to appropriate staffing and data collection going forward. To compensate for the district's past failures to provide our client with a FAPE, DRM secured the District's commitment to fund our client's participation in Pine Tree Society's Camp Communicate, a summer AAC camp for children and their caregivers, as well as provide a significant educational fund for our client, to be used for educational, community, and vocational programming, including reimbursement for assistive technology.

DRM assists client to secure compensation after wrongful employment termination. A young person with a diagnosis of autism spectrum disorder and a history of depression contacted DRM seeking assistance with an employment discrimination matter. The man had been placed on administrative leave, and ultimately terminated, in the aftermath of an attempt by client to take his own life. A DRM attorney reviewed employment records and provided substantial counsel and advice related to client's rights and options. DRM drafted multiple letters to counsel for client's former employer and engaged in significant negotiation to reach a settlement agreement. Under the terms of the agreement, the client's former employer agreed to strict confidentiality of the man's experience during his employment and the circumstances that led to the end of that employment. The former employer also agreed to provide the client with a neutral reference in addition to \$7,000 in compensation.

DRM helps client who was unable to leave emergency department for 63 days by filing writ of habeas corpus. A 45-year-old Deaf woman was taken to an emergency department and placed under an involuntary psychiatric hold. State law dictated that she should be transferred to a psychiatric hospital when a bed became "available." Despite other patients in similar situations being transferred after her, she remained in the emergency department for 63 days. This was because the psychiatric hospitals had complete discretion to refuse patients from the emergency department, including the hospital where she was held, which had its own psychiatric unit. Consequently, she was stuck in the emergency department because none of the state's psychiatric hospitals wanted to admit her.

DRM filed a Writ of Habeas Corpus against the hospital holding her. Within two days, she was transferred to the hospital's psychiatric unit. Despite her transfer, the court held a hearing due to the significance of the issue. The court noted that the system allowed such situations, but that the court couldn't mandate systemic changes. It ordered that for the next five years, if a similar situation arose where the client was held in the emergency department, the hospital must notify DRM. The court emphasized that this was an issue for the Executive and Legislative branches to address.

DRM representation in court results in client avoid eviction and maintaining housing. A 46-year-old woman had been involuntarily admitted to a psychiatric hospital. During her admission, her landlord filed an eviction action against her. DRM represented the woman in court. Prior to the final hearing, the parties reached a reasonable accommodation agreement that resulted in the client being able to move back into her apartment and the eviction action being dismissed.

DRM negotiates settlement to compensate client for employer's failure to accommodate. Our client is a long-time college instructor and an individual who has had two aneurisms and experiences severe migraines. To accommodate her disability, the client requested that she be permitted to teach remotely, as she had done on previous occasions during her years of employment. Her employer denied the request despite documentation from the client's doctor supporting her ability to undertake the essential functions of her job with that accommodation. DRM filed an administrative appeal with the client's former employer, filed a complaint with the Maine Human Rights Commission, participated in mediation, and engaged in substantial negotiation efforts to ultimately reach a \$65K settlement agreement to resolve the dispute. The DRM attorney also provided substantial advice related to the client's application for disability retirement benefits, which she was ultimately awarded. As a result of DRM's advocacy, client was able to leave her employment with dignity and compensation for substantial lost wages and emotional harm she experienced because of the employer's failure to accommodate.

DRM assistance results in school following the law. DRM was contacted by the parent/guardian of a student who had been told that his educational services would be reduced solely because he was turning 20 years old. Even though DRM had filed a state-wide systemic complaint in order to establish that children in Maine, like those elsewhere, were entitled to a free and appropriate public education until they either a) received a regular high school diploma, or b) reached the age of 22, and even though this administrative decision had been recently codified in statute, the school district apparently had a practice of continuing to reduce services for students when they turned 20, regardless of their individual needs. DRM investigated and determined that this policy impacted multiple youth and filed a systemic complaint with Maine DOE. Maine DOE found that the district's policies and practices violated the IDEA with regard to DRM's client and also with regard to several other youth. MDOE ordered corrective action which included : training all special education staff with regard to individualized determinations and the proper development and preparation of written notices; required the District to communicate with all potentially impacted youth to outline their rights and offer an IEP team meeting; and, with regard to the students where violations were found, MDOE ordered the District to convene IEP teams to consider whether additional evaluations were needed, the appropriateness of placements and the provision of compensatory education services to address the period of reduced programming. These students will no longer have their transition services reduced inappropriately, allowing them to receive the services and supports necessary to support a successful transition to employment and independent living.

DRM assistance results in successful DOE complaint against CDS. Our client was a 4-year-old boy with diagnoses including sensory processing disorder and gross

motor delays. His mother reached out to DRM with concerns that CDS had not ever provided the specially designed instruction or physical therapy under his IEP, and further, her son had been manifesting disability-related behaviors which had led to two prior dismissals from early childhood programs within the year, as well as the threat of dismissal from his current program—yet CDS had not provided the 1:1 support he required under his IEP. A DRM attorney worked closely with the parent to provide guidance through the Maine Department of Education complaint investigation procedure, including preparing the complaint, preparing for the interview, determining documents and identifying interviewees to submit, and understanding how to advocate for compensatory educational services. In the end, the Complaint Investigator found in the parent’s favor on all of the issues in the complaint, including a finding that CDS had failed to provide a free appropriate public education to the child as required under federal and state law, ordering the parent to be reimbursed for certain OT equipment the family had paid for themselves when CDS did not provide it, and ordering compensatory education to be provided to the child. The boy is now receiving the specially designed education, OT, and PT under his IEP, and he is looking forward to starting a public pre-K program in the fall.

DRM intervention results in CDS providing appropriate services to allow student to remain in inclusive school setting. Our client was a 4-year-old boy with an autism spectrum disorder. His mother contacted DRM with concerns that for nearly two years, her son required and was legally entitled to specially designed instruction, 1:1 support from an educational technician, occupational therapy, and speech therapy—but CDS still had never provided specially designed instruction or 1:1 support for her son. In addition, OT and speech therapy were inconsistently provided, and sometimes not provided at all for significant stretches. As a result, with the passage of time and the failure of CDS to provide appropriate special education and supports, her son’s behaviors dramatically increased. Soon after contacting DRM, the child’s mother reported being called to pick him up early from his Head Start program four out of five days a week—and severely impacting her ability to work. With assistance from a DRM attorney, the parent laid out appropriate requests at an IEP meeting for services to which her son was legally entitled. When those requests were denied and/or unfulfilled, DRM assisted the parent file a state Complaint Investigation Request with the Maine Department of Education. DRM then guided the parent through the mediation process; the simultaneous Kindergarten Transition IEP process; and demanding appropriate relief for past failures of CDS to provide her son with a free appropriate public education. Mediation and the transition IEP meetings were successful: CDS agreed to provide compensatory OT, speech therapy, play therapy, transportation reimbursement to services, a 1:1 for increased hours through the summer (and staff the position), and contract with an

inclusion specialist from CCIDS to assist with the successful transition into the inclusive kindergarten classroom; the incoming school district agreed to the provision of a 1:1 support, in addition to a general education placement as the least restrictive environment.

DRM represents student in successful complaint with Maine DOE, finding school in violation of student's rights. Our client was a 15-year-old boy with ADHD, a communication disorder, and clinical depression. School staff were not implementing his IEP and had repeatedly suspended him. The DRM attorney requested and attended a manifestation determination review with the client's parent and the IEP team determined the behaviors had been manifestations of his disability. After another suspension in which the school insisted the student submit to a threat assessment, DRM filed a complaint for investigation with the Maine DOE alleging multiple violations of the IDEA and related state education laws. The attorney attended multiple mediation sessions, none of which resulted in a mediation agreement, as well as IEP and manifestation meetings. The DOE found overwhelmingly that the district had violated the student's rights. DOE found that the district suspended the student for more than ten days without conducting a manifestation determination; changed his educational placement without providing written notice; failed to provide him a "free and appropriate public education" in the "least restrictive environment"; failed to implement his IEP; and failed to maintain his "stay-put" placement. As a result, DOE issued a Corrective Action Plan which required the district convene an IEP meeting to review the student's educational placement and his return to his school. The CAP also required that the IEP team determine the student's compensatory education needs.

DRM represents student in successfully challenging CDS' determination of ineligibility, resulting in appropriate services in mainstream classroom. Our client was a 4-year-old preschool boy whose parent reached out to DRM when CDS impermissibly determined that the child "did not qualify" for special education and related services because of the child's particular emotional diagnosis. Although the child had been routinely restrained and secluded—and sent home from school--because of behaviors directly related to his disability, CDS' position was that the child merely had a "conduct disorder"; asserted that that made him ineligible; and declined to provide special education and related services. An attorney from DRM worked closely with the parent to navigate the Complaint Investigation process. When an acceptable resolution was not achieved through mediation, with the guidance of DRM, the family decided to cease mediation—and the Complaint Investigator found for the family. She determined that the child indeed had an eligible disability under the IDEA; found that CDS had violated the child's right to a free, appropriate public education; and ordered compensatory services for CDS' failure to make a timely and

correct eligibility determination. The child is now receiving 1:1 support by a classroom aide, specially designed instruction, speech therapy, play therapy, and compensatory education services—within the mainstream classroom setting. He is looking forward to entering mainstream kindergarten with appropriate supports this fall.

DRM intervention results in school district supporting student's communication needs with ASL interpreter. The mother of a 7-year-old Deaf girl with a cochlear implant contacted DRM after her school district did not renew the contact it had with an ASL interpreter. The district was going to hire an ed tech and pay her to learn ASL; the girl's primary means of communication. DRM filed a due process hearing request and agreed to attempt mediation. At first the mediation failed, as the district refused to attempt to hire an ASL interpreter. Subsequently, the school district asked to reopen the mediation which the parents agreed to. The district agreed to look for an interpreter and the parents agreed to the ed tech in the interim, and the district agreed to continue to pay for ASL lessons for the ed tech.

DRM helps client terminate guardianship and move home to his family. DRM was contacted by a man in his 50s with IDD seeking assistance with a guardianship issue. The man had moved to Maine some years back with family, and eventually an acquaintance was appointed his guardian due to concerns about his safety. The guardian was helpful at first by getting him set up with services and into stable housing, but the man eventually found himself in Maine without any family, and wanted to move back to his home state to be with his vast extended family, who very much wanted him to join them. The guardian would not consider this, and refused to take any steps to effectuate the move, despite numerous visits to his home state that went well. Eventually, the man's cousin, with whom he is very close, obtained an attorney and filed a petition to take over guardianship of the man so that she could work with him to achieve his goal of moving close to family. A DRM attorney agreed to represent the man in the matter. The DRM attorney worked closely with the client, and the cousin's attorney. The guardian continued to state a position on the man's request. At the hearing, she finally told the judge that she was not challenging the petition, and the court terminated her guardianship and appointed the client's cousin as guardian. The cousin is now working directly with the client's providers to obtain services in his home state. The client told the attorney he was very much looking forward to moving back to be with his family.

DRM representation leads to termination of guardianship and full restoration of client's fundamental rights. A woman with a developmental disability contacted DRM when she was having issues with her guardian. The client loved the home where she lived, but the guardian tried to force her to move, going so far as arriving to

the client's home to attempt to physically force the client into a car to be brought to a new, unknown residence. The client stood firm and refused to be coerced. A DRM attorney represented the client in filing a grievance in court against her guardian for this breach of fiduciary duty, as well as an administrative grievance against her case manager for their role in the incident. When the court expressed concern about the egregious rights violation, the guardian voluntarily resigned, and the guardianship was terminated. When other family expressed interest in becoming the client's guardian, the DRM attorney successfully negotiated less restrictive alternatives and helped them utilize Supported Decision-Making instead. The client, with guidance from DRM, was also able to terminate her former guardian as rep payee, and the client has her rights fully restored.

DRM represents client when estranged parent tries to become guardian. DRM received a request for assistance from a former client who was seeking representation against a petition for guardianship filed by their parent. DRM had successfully represented the client in an almost identical matter a year earlier, when their estranged parent filed a petition to take over guardianship from the other parent and force the client to move out of state against his wishes, based on unfounded allegations. This case was the estranged parent's 4th attempt. This time, the DRM attorney filed a motion to dismiss based on res judicata, the concept that these alleged facts had already been litigated and a decision issued in the past. The opposing attorney withdrew shortly thereafter on the grounds that the petitioner was requesting the attorney to take actions they fundamentally disagreed with. The court held a hearing, and granted the client's motion to dismiss. Although it declined to impose sanctions, the court warned the petitioner it would strongly consider them in the future. The client was happy to have the matter behind him, and knows he can contact DRM again.

DRM represents client in terminating unnecessary guardianship. DRM was contacted by a 24-year-old woman under the guardianship of her parents. She wanted to terminate the guardianship because she felt she could make her own decisions, and because her parents treated her like a child, even "grounding" her for breaking house rules. When the client contacted DRM, she had left her home and moved in then with her boyfriend and his mother, who are significant supports in her life. The client had support from her doctor and others to terminate, and was in the process of getting a job. A DRM attorney represented the client in court on a petition to terminate the guardianship. The client's parents refused to negotiate or converse with the attorney. Fortunately, at the hearing, they informed the court they would not be contesting, and the guardianship was terminated. Since that time, the client continues to live with her boyfriend and his mother, has obtained employment, manages her own money (including SS benefits), and is learning to drive.

DRM helps client obtain reasonable accommodation and avoid eviction. A 44-year-old woman was served a Notice to Quit for her apartment where she had lived for about 6 years. The Notice was based on alleged behaviors toward Property Management staff and neighbors. DRM made a reasonable accommodation request, asking that the client be allowed to stay in her unit and have the notice rescinded if she were to connect with case management and continue with her other current health care providers. DRM supported client in self-referring to case management services by making calls to agencies and following up on those referrals, and the client was able to begin case management. DRM continued negotiations with the landlord's attorneys, including facilitating a Zoom call with involved parties and the client's supports. DRM proposed a reasonable accommodation agreement. The final reasonable accommodation agreement resulted in the client's Notice to Quit being rescinded with her lease to continue.

DRM advocacy results in client maintaining Medicaid coverage needed to remain in home. DRM was contacted by a 50-year-old woman after she received a denial of coverage notice from the state's Medicaid Managed Care Organization (MCO), jeopardizing her residency at a mental health group home. Workers at the group home had submitted a request for her to be evaluated for a supported apartment setting, which prompted the MCO to conduct a broader review of her overall eligibility, ultimately resulting in the denial. DRM determined that the MCO's process violated the client's procedural and substantive due process rights and subsequently filed an administrative appeal along with pre-hearing motions. Following DRM's intervention but before the hearing date, the MCO reassessed the case and reversed its decision. The client was then approved for a supported apartment, allowing her to move from the group home into her own apartment.

DRM demands student be allowed to attend school of choice. DRM's client was an 8th grader with an acquired brain injury, which resulted in significant health and mobility-related impairments who was being excluded from her school of choice because of her disability. The student lived in a district without a high school, and the district offered a school choice program where students could select from a number of public and private schools with tuition paid by their school district. The student had selected, and was accepted to, a college preparatory private school, which then rescinded its offer of enrollment when it learned that she needed 1:1 assistance to access her education and to participate in activities of daily living during her school day. DRM sent a demand letter to the school, indicating that the actions of the school violated the ADA and indicated that we would be initiating legal action if the issue was not resolved quickly. DRM engaged in discussions with counsel for the private school and was able to use a mediation agreement reached with the home school district to address any concerns the school had about the provision of the

supportive services required. As a result, the student was able to begin the current school year in a college preparatory private school with supportive services provided by her resident district, where she has been making friends, attended homecoming, and is enjoying being challenged academically as she pursues her goal of attending MIT.

DRM assists client in obtaining home supports to avoid institutionalization.

DRM represented a 50-year-old woman with ALS to receive more hours than permitted under MaineCare rules, in order for her to receive services at home. A DRM attorney filed a request for exception in order for the client to receive home support hours in excess of the monetary cap. DRM argued that her unnecessary institutionalization would have violated the Americans with Disabilities Act, Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act, and the Supreme Court's decision in *Olmstead*. DHHS agreed to the request and allowed more hours. As the client's condition worsened, DRM made subsequent requests for more hours, and each time DHHS granted extra hours. The client eventually passed away, but was able to live out her remaining days outside of an institution in accordance with her wishes.

DRM intervention results in child returning to pre-K with appropriate supports.

Our client was a 4-year-old non-verbal boy with diagnoses including a complex congenital growth disorder and autism requiring significant support. His parents reached out to DRM when his special purpose private preschool abruptly expelled him for disability-related behaviors, and CDS had no prospects on the horizon for a new placement for him. Upon investigation, it became evident to DRM that not only had the child not received appropriate emotional and behavioral supports at the special purpose preschool, but he also had gone an entire school year without receiving the intensive speech therapy under his IEP. DRM represented the child through his family and filed a due process hearing against both CDS and the special purpose private preschool. At mediation, the preschool agreed to receive training in the IEP process; and our client was awarded significant compensatory speech-language services and specially designed instruction from CDS at a new preschool with appropriate supports. As a result of DRM's advocacy, our client also finally received a proper AAC evaluation, and he is currently trialing a speech-generating device to enable him to develop functional expressive communication skills. Our client has recently begun a new year of pre-K, his disability-related behaviors have significantly abated, he is successfully following classroom routines, he continues to make strides in developing communication, and he is demonstrating blossoming emotional regulation and pre-academic skills. His mother reports that he is now excited to go to school every morning.

DRM helps client access preschool with supports to which she is entitled. The parents of a preschool girl with Down Syndrome contacted DRM with concerns that four months had passed since their daughter's 3rd birthday, when her Early Intervention Services ended and she was to have begun receiving "Part B" preschool special education and related services through CDS. In fact, despite having had a transition planning meeting nearly six months earlier, evaluations had not even been initiated, an IEP had not been developed, and no services had been provided. DRM worked closely with the parents to understand their daughter's and their rights under federal special education law, and provided guidance for navigating the IEP process. When procedural irregularities ensured that threatened the child's right to appropriate compensatory education and extended school year (ESY) services, DRM directly represented the child through the family in a series of IEP meetings in quick succession to ensure that all evaluations were conducted, an appropriate IEP was developed, the child's placement was changed from an unnecessarily restrictive segregated setting to an inclusive setting in the regular early childhood education classroom, and appropriate compensatory services and ESY services were provided. The child now attends an inclusive preschool, where she receives specially designed instruction, speech therapy, occupational therapy, and physical therapy, while playing and learning alongside typically developing peers. She continues to receive compensatory services to address the nearly half-year delay in the start of her services.

Client accesses education and support in least restrictive setting with DRM's assistance. The mother of a blind 4-year-old boy contacted DRM with concerns that her child had been eligible for special education and related services since his 3rd birthday, but 14 months later, CDS had yet to provide a placement for him in an early childhood education program, and had yet to provide any specially designed instruction, speech therapy, or occupational therapy whatsoever. A DRM attorney discovered that the CDS staff had recently and impermissibly suggested to the parent that she agree to change the child's designated placement from the mainstream early childhood education classroom to a segregated, special purpose private preschool to "increase his chances of getting services." Through DRM representation, the child's designated placement was restored to the least restrictive environment without delay. DRM then filed a complaint and due process hearing request with the Maine DOE for CDS's past and present failures to provide the child with the free appropriate public education to which he was legally entitled. Through two rounds of mediation separated by several months to give CDS a good faith opportunity to fulfill the child's IEP—which it was ultimately unable to do—DRM assisted the family obtain interim specially designed instruction, speech, and OT in the physical environment of a local elementary school where the child would later enroll. The child's teacher for the visually impaired and his orientation and mobility instructor provided services on site to acclimate the child to the school building. DRM negotiated significant

compensatory education and ESY services for the child, to ensure he was properly included and supported in the mainstream kindergarten class, as well as enable him opportunities focused on developing peer and social skills to make up for his lack of appropriate services for two full years.

DRM's assistance results in student's immediate return to school and settlement for discrimination. DRM was contacted by the guardian of a 13-year-old student with a trauma-related mental health disability who had been excluded from school for disability-related behaviors. DRM filed a due process hearing, which resulted in the student's immediate return to school. A subsequent settlement agreement resulted in: a) compensatory education in the form of academic tutoring to be provided over the coming school year and two weeks of overnight summer camps that the student was interested in attending; b) expert consultation from the student's chosen mental health providers to school staff; and c) fees to DRM.

DRM represents client in guardianship termination. A woman in her 30s with a developmental disability contacted DRM seeking to terminate a limited medical guardianship to which she was subject since age 18. She had been living in a shared living setting and making her own medical decisions for some years, yet she remained under guardianship despite it not being necessary. A DRM attorney represented the client in filing a petition to terminate the guardianship. Her medical providers declined to opine to the court her capacity on the ground that it was not within their expertise to do so, and not because they felt she lacked capacity. The guardians failed to appear at the hearing, and the DRM attorney put testimonial evidence into the record and the court was convinced a case for termination had been made and was in the client's best interests, and issued an order of termination.

DRM assistance results in school being held accountable for failing to provide interpreters and other services to Deaf student. DRM was contacted by the parent of an elementary age student who was Deaf and also had a developmental disability regarding concerns that the school district was failing to provide the ASL interpreter required by her IEP, had failed to conduct appropriate evaluations, and was otherwise failing to deliver appropriate programming. The DRM attorney supported the family at multiple IEP meetings and eventually filed a complaint with the Maine DOE, who found that the school had violated the student's right to a free and appropriate public education. Following the decision, the DRM attorney supported the family in negotiating a compensatory education package that included robust summer programming including both school and camp activities, where the student would have access to signing peers. In addition, the school hired a full-time teacher of the Deaf to work with the student and is now transporting the student to a regular social event in a nearby district to increase her access to signing peers. Finally,

evaluations were conducted and new IEP goals and programming were developed as a result.

DRM assists student with DOE complaint after being unlawfully excluded from school. Our client was a 17-year-old student whose mother contacted us with concerns that the school district had refused to allow her child to enroll in the local high school after they had been successfully discharged from a residential treatment program. The district was insisting that because the student had attended a residential program, they must now attend a special purpose private school; and because no placement was available at the time, the school unilaterally made this decision to place the student on bi-weekly in-home tutoring for the past seven months. Upon investigating the parent's concerns, a DRM attorney provided in-depth assistance to the parent in drafting and filing a complaint with the Maine DOE, alleging the school's failure to provide the student with a free appropriate public education and violating the student's right to an education in the least restrictive environment appropriate to the student—along with committing myriad procedural violations of state and federal special education law. The DRM attorney then assisted the parent and student navigate the complaint investigation process and reply to the school's response. The Complaint Investigator found for the parent and student on all issues and ordered an IEP meeting to address questions of placement and compensatory education. Through direct representation, the DRM attorney advocated for the student and their parent at subsequent IEP meetings and in negotiations with the district's counsel concerning compensatory education. As a result of DRM's advocacy, the student successfully enrolled in the high school, their IEP was free of the more restrictive conditions that the school initially pressed for, and the student was awarded access to a significant compensatory education fund for programming and services to help them successfully transition to higher education/training, employment, and independent living after high school.

DRM helps client obtain reasonable accommodation and avoid eviction. A 72-year-old man contacted DRM after receiving a Notice to Quit from his landlord. He was working with a case manager to find alternative, supportive housing, and needed more time to create a moving plan, and also wanted to maintain his housing voucher. A DRM attorney submitted a reasonable accommodation request to our client's landlord and, following negotiations with the landlord and the landlord's attorney, DRM successfully obtained a reasonable accommodation on behalf of the client, and the client was granted an additional 90 days by which to move. The landlord also agreed to dismiss the eviction matter pending against client if he left his unit in advance of the agreed upon date. The client was able to find alternative housing and, because of DRM's assistance, was able to avoid eviction and maintain his housing voucher.

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IMMIGRANT LEGAL ADVOCACY PROJECT

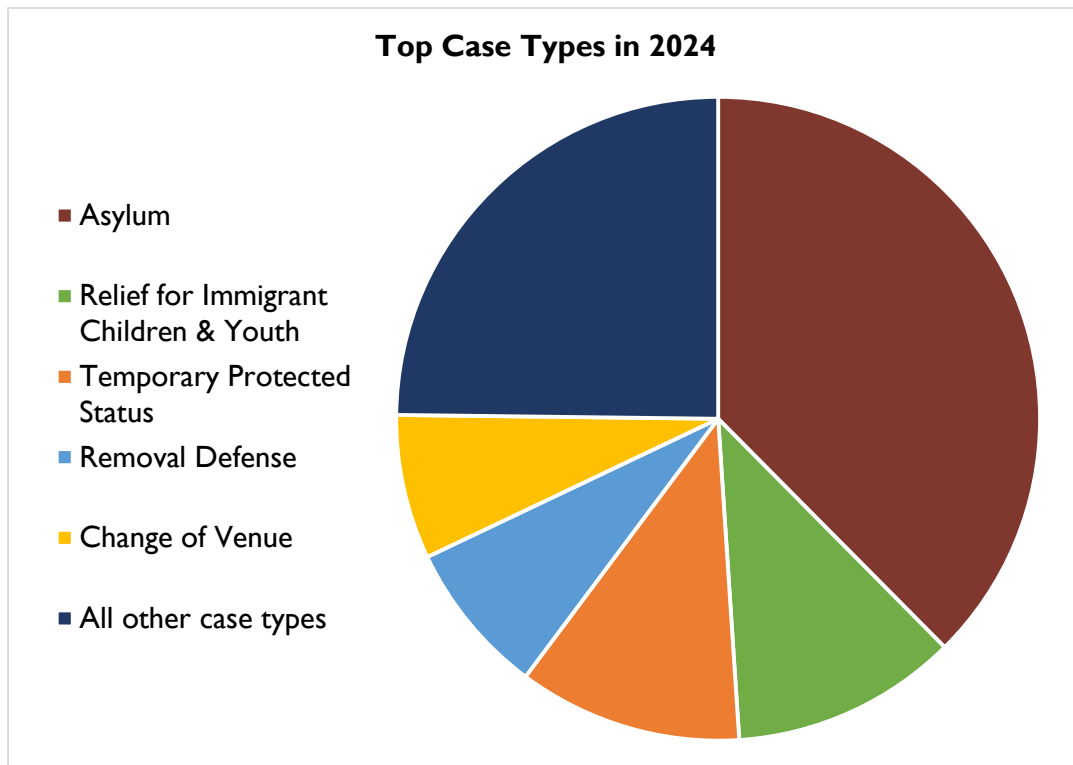
Immigrant Legal Advocacy Project Annual Report to the Maine Civil Legal Services Fund Commission *January 22, 2025*

In 2024, funding from the Maine Civil Legal Services Fund (MCLSF) allowed the Immigrant Legal Advocacy Project (ILAP) to advance justice and equity for immigrants and their families through direct immigration legal services and community legal education. Other sources of funding supported our systemic advocacy work.

In total, ILAP served 5,214 people, including:

- 2,470 people through direct legal service cases (case types detailed in the chart below)
- 2,744 people through 119 community legal education and outreach events.

Immigration cases have increased in complexity and longevity in recent years, including many more humanitarian cases for clients in immigration court amid growing court backlogs. These cases require removal defense and often involve interaction with immigration enforcement/detention.



Overview

Founded in 1993, ILAP's mission is to help low-income immigrants improve their legal status and to work for more just and humane laws and policies affecting immigrants. We are Maine's only statewide immigration legal services organization, with full-time offices in Portland and Lewiston and a regular presence across the state through our Rural Maine Project. Technology, volunteers, and partners help us directly engage with thousands of people each year in all sixteen Maine counties.

Our core work advances justice and equity for immigrants and their families through three complementary strategies:

- 1) Provide a continuum of direct legal services to low-income immigrants to help them find safety from violence and persecution, keep their families together, and advance toward economic security.
- 2) Offer accurate, timely, and translated education and outreach to immigrant community members and service providers to share knowledge, build power, and prevent future legal complications.
- 3) Collaborate with immigrant-led groups and partner organizations on systemic advocacy at the local, state, and federal levels to safeguard and promote legal protections for immigrant communities.

In recent years, many thousands of newly arrived immigrants have settled in Maine, and the need for free, high-quality immigration legal services in our state continued to grow in 2024. We are pleased to update you on our progress over the last year, highlight key trends shaping our work, and share plans for moving forward.

Types of cases handled

The core of ILAP's work is our direct legal services, which are provided by our highly trained and dedicated staff attorneys, accredited representatives, and paralegals. Beyond making a significant and tangible difference in the lives of Maine's immigrants, our casework deepens the expertise we then share in our community workshops and informs our advocacy priorities.

In 2024, ILAP handled **442 full representation cases** and **2,028 limited representation cases**. In line with our mission and strategic plan, we prioritize humanitarian cases that assist those at risk of persecution and violence—including asylum seekers, victims of domestic violence or human trafficking, and children—as well as cases with clients experiencing or at risk of family separation, those involving due process violations, and those that will improve a client's economic security.

Case Type	Number
Asylum	928
Relief for Immigrant Children & Youth/Special Immigrant Juvenile Status (SIJS)	281
Temporary Protected Status	278
Removal Defense	191
Change of Venue	179
Permanent Residency	128
General Options Consultation	120
Relief for victims of domestic violence, human trafficking, and other crimes	76
Work Authorization	68
Permanent Resident Card Renewal/Replacement	33
Family Reunification	20
Other	168
Total	2,470

Number of people served

Direct legal services

With the expert attorney guidance and representation available only at ILAP, last year immigrant community members again found safety from violence and persecution, kept their families together, and advanced towards economic security because of improved legal status. Whether through an in-depth one-time consultation or full legal representation in complex multi-year cases, our services ensured that immigrant Mainers could remain the neighbors, business owners, parents, and leaders making a better future for us all. ILAP is honored to be a part of their journey, fulfilling the potential of our welcoming communities by ensuring that everyone, regardless of immigration status, can fully participate and have equal protection under the law.

In 2024, we provided **direct legal services to 2,470 people** on the case types detailed above.

ILAP has a **200-member Pro Bono Panel** and, because of the complexity and length of cases, not all Panel members have open cases each year. Last year, 41 *pro bono* attorneys had open cases and **donated 2,265 hours of their time at a value of \$834,315** providing full representation or asylum application assistance to asylum seekers and vulnerable immigrant youth. We also received significant volunteer time from community members assisting with interpretation and translation, mental health evaluations, and other organizational projects. These dedicated volunteers expand our reach and add valuable capacity to serve clients we would otherwise be unable to serve.

Community legal education

Through our community legal education, we provided timely, accurate, and accessible group informational workshops and other resources on immigration law matters to immigrant groups, service providers, schools and adult education providers, healthcare providers, and the public. Available in several languages, materials and presentations counteracted incomplete or inaccurate

information and prevented complications that could negatively affect legal status or lead to exploitation or deportation, including victimization by individuals engaged in the unauthorized practice of immigration law. These workshops and resources also seek to build on the power and resiliency within Maine’s immigrant communities to respond to new challenges as they arise.

In 2024, **2,744 immigrant community members and service providers** across the state attended **119 outreach events**.

Selected training topics in 2024
Know Your Rights
Legal Orientation for Asylum Seekers
Overview of U.S. Immigration Law
What Immigrant Communities Need to Know Right Now

Demand for accurate and timely information was high throughout the summer and fall due to the significant level of anti-immigrant rhetoric and misinformation during the Presidential election cycle. These concerns were further exacerbated following the election and the incoming administration’s promised anti-immigrant agenda. In response, ILAP added more know your rights materials to our website and increased outreach to provide critical information on legal rights to immigrant community members and partner organizations.

Last year, we again used technology to extend our reach and improve access to our services, supplementing in-person services in Portland and Lewiston and our field-based Rural Maine Project. Through ILAP’s website, available in six languages, potential clients may request an appointment using an online form and can access a variety of resources to answer common immigration questions. In 2024, digital platforms that shared information for immigrant community members had the following reach:

- ILAP’s website (www.ilapmaine.org) had 159,000 unique visitors and 189,000 visits.
- Our *Golden Door* e-newsletter reached 4,000 subscribers each month and achieved a 45% open rate.
- ILAP’s Facebook page had more than 10,000 views, including by 4,300 followers and ILAP’s Instagram page had almost 25,000 views, including by more than 1,100 followers.
- ILAP was a regular contributor to Amjambo Africa and Maine Public News Connect, two multilingual news services for Maine’s immigrant communities.

Systemic advocacy

In 2024, ILAP’s policy efforts were guided by priorities informed by and built on the needs and goals identified by our client community and immigrant communities in Maine. At the federal level, we continued our advocacy work in the “Let Asylum Seekers Work” campaign, continued to fight back against federal immigration policies seeking to limit access to asylum, and submitted urgent policy recommendations in response to the opening of a new immigration court in Chelmsford, Massachusetts. At the state level, ILAP advocated in support of the establishment of the Maine

Office of New Americans and is proud that Maine will become the 19th state in the country to have such as office. In total, ILAP joined more than 35 policy recommendation and advocacy letters and was featured in the media on 33 occasions in response to a range of immigration issues.

Note that MCLSF funds supported ILAP's direct legal services and community legal education, but not our systemic advocacy work. We include a short summary here simply to share the full scope of our interconnected model.

Demographic information about people served

ILAP services are available to people living in Maine with incomes up to 200% of federal poverty guidelines. Demographic information for the 2,470 people reached through our direct legal services is detailed in the table below.

Category	% of people
Gender	48% female 52% male <1% nonbinary/gender nonconforming <1% unknown
Age	17% under 18 79% ages 18-60 3% over 60 <1% unknown
Race/ethnicity	64% African or African American 3% Asian 28% Latinx <1% other 4% White <1% unknown
Citizenship status	99% noncitizens <1% U.S. citizen by birth or naturalization
Top countries of origin	Angola, Democratic Republic of the Congo, Haiti, Venezuela, Ecuador (more than 80 countries total)
Top primary languages	Spanish, Portuguese, French, Haitian Creole, Lingala (more than 40 languages total)

Note that although we do not collect detailed demographic information for people participating in our community legal education, the data listed above is broadly reflective of those services as well.

Geographic area served

In 2024, approximately 60% of ILAP clients lived in Cumberland County and 40% lived outside of Cumberland County. This split continues a trend in recent years of greater geographic diversity

amongst our clients—in 2020, 75% lived of clients in Cumberland County and 25% lived outside of Cumberland County.

Geographic information for 2,470 clients served through our direct legal services is reflected in the table below.

County	# of people
Androscoggin	307
Aroostook	3
Cumberland	1,491
Franklin	1
Hancock	39
Kennebec	112
Knox	2
Lincoln	6
Oxford	3
Penobscot	40
Piscataquis	1
Sagadahoc	13
Somerset	34
Waldo	16
Washington	15
York	299
Unknown	88

Note that although we do not collect detailed geographic information for people participating in our community legal education, the data listed above is broadly reflective of those services as well.

Status of matters handled, including whether they are complete or open

For our 442 full representation cases, at year-end, 311 of these cases remained open, and 131 were closed/completed. For our 2,028 limited representation cases, 518 were open and 1,510 were closed/completed at year-end.

Whether and to what extent the organization has complied with its proposal to the Commission

As detailed in this report, ILAP fully complied with our proposal submitted to the Commission in fall 2023 for 2024 and 2025 funding. In total, we reached 5,214 people in 2024, exceeding our target of 2,750-3,300 people per year. These outcomes indicate that we achieved our goal of helping more immigrants in Maine attain and maintain legal status, a threshold need and the critical first step towards finding safety from persecution and violence, keeping families together, and improving economic security.

Outcome measurements used to determine compliance

ILAP uses specialized case management software to track our legal work and determine compliance with requirements imposed by MCLSF and other funders. This software allows us to retain quantitative data on client demographics, legal services provided, case outcomes, and much more.

We measure the quality of our full representation work by tracking the outcomes of all intermediate or final decisions received. In 2024, we maintained a greater than 99% approval rate for full representation cases that received a final decision (which can take several years).

Because decisions on limited representation cases go directly to the client, rather than ILAP, we are unable to track final outcomes. Instead, we measure our performance by the number of applications successfully filed without being rejected by the relevant government department or agency.

Program updates and additional accomplishments

ILAP continues to progress towards our 2021-2025 strategic plans goals of providing more direct legal assistance and outreach, making services equitable statewide, and advancing racial justice for immigrants, including:

- Strengthening core services, including full representation, *pro se* assistance, and *pro bono* partnerships, to meet the growing immigration legal needs in local communities.
- Continuing to innovate projects to reach special populations, including newly arrived individuals and families seeking asylum, immigrant children and youth, and immigrants living in rural Maine who may have experienced labor exploitation or trafficking.

Strengthening Core Services

Over the last year, ILAP has continued to strengthen our core services to meet more of the existing and growing need for free, high-quality immigration legal services across Maine. A key strategy in this effort was offering *pro se* (limited representation) services to help meet critical legal needs in local communities, while continuing to provide full representation to as many people as possible.

ILAP staff provided *pro se* assistance to 278 individuals eligible to apply for Temporary Protected Status (TPS), a form of humanitarian protection granted to eligible foreign nationals who are unable to return home safely due to natural disasters, unrest, or conflict. Those granted TPS receive lifesaving protection from deportation and access to work authorization, enabling them to support their families and contribute to Maine's economy. Clients served included nationals of Haiti, Venezuela, Cameroon, Somalia, El Salvador, Ukraine, and Sudan, among other countries.

Throughout the year, we also hosted a monthly Change of Venue clinic to help immigrants prepare and submit motions to move their immigration court cases to Chelmsford Immigration Court, which is the new immigration court for people living in Maine. Through no fault of their own, many

newly arriving immigrants have had their cases docketed in immigration courts in other parts of the country and many find it extremely difficult, if not impossible, to participate in legal proceedings. When an immigrant fails to appear at an immigration court hearing, they are generally ordered deported. In 2024, ILAP helped file 115 motions to change venue for 153 people, helping to ensure they will not receive a deportation order for failing to appear in a faraway court.

With the support of our panel of *pro bono* attorneys, ILAP continued to provide legal representation to Afghan evacuees in their asylum cases and advocated for long-term legal pathways for Maine's Afghan community three years after the U.S. withdrawal from Afghanistan.

In 2024, ILAP also continued to provide representation to victims of domestic violence, human trafficking, and other crimes. These cases have been a central part of our work since becoming a staffed organization in 2000 and utilize long-term partnerships with our peer civil legal aid providers and domestic and sexual violence prevention and response organizations across the state.

Innovating Projects to Reach Special Populations

While ILAP's core services remain the backbone of our work providing legal services to immigrants across Maine, we have identified that some special populations need tailored outreach and services to more effectively meet their needs. In response, we have developed and continue to innovate special projects to serve these groups, including newly arrived immigrants seeking asylum, immigrant children and youth, and immigrants living in rural Maine. These projects also seek to respond to a troubling increase in the unauthorized practice of immigration law.

The Asylum Assistance and Legal Orientation Program (AALOP) seeks to reach as many people as possible who have newly arrived in Maine and need legal assistance to seek humanitarian protection to remain in their new home. The project provides critical legal information and asylum application assistance through robust outreach meeting people where they are in the community and novel workshop model developed and implemented with American Bar Association's Commission on Immigration, Maine Law's Refugee and Human Rights Clinic, and Catholic Charities Maine's Immigrant Legal Services. In 2024, AALOP held 38 legal education and outreach sessions for 784 asylum seekers, provided individualized screening and legal consultations to 582 individuals, and assisted 370 asylum applicants to prepare and file asylum applications for them and their families with help from immigration attorneys.

ILAP believes that no child or young person should face the immigration system alone. Our Immigrant Children's Project seeks to increase legal representation for immigrant children and youth across Maine in their pursuit of Special Immigrant Juvenile Status (SIJS), a humanitarian form of immigration relief that provides a pathway to legal permanent residence. Over the last several years, we have significantly expanded our capacity, and the Project now assists more than 300 children and youth annually. In 2024, the Project focused significant efforts on assisting the many newly arrived unaccompanied and unhoused immigrant teens and young people in greater Portland. As part of this work, ILAP staff held twice monthly office hours at the Preble Street Teen Center, mentored and coached *pro bono* attorneys representing immigrant children and youth, and held regular trainings for schools, service providers, and others who work with vulnerable youth.

ILAP also continued to expand the capacity of our Rural Maine Project, which now has two full-time staff members, to deepen connections, build trust, and increase accessibility for farmworkers and other rural communities across the state. Through affirmative outreach in collaboration with partners in rural Maine, ILAP staff conduct workshops on important legal issues, offer individualized legal screenings and consultations, and respond to large-scale labor exploitation and trafficking situations. In 2024, the Rural Maine Project conducted 14 outreach events for immigrant community members and partner organizations, distributed outreach materials to 518 people, and completed individualized screenings and provided direct legal services for 323 people. Key partners in this work include Pine Tree Legal Assistance, Maine Mobile Health Program, Preble Street Anti-Trafficking Services, Mano en Mano, Capital Area New Mainers Project, and other immigrant groups.

Information regarding unmet and underserved needs

Over the past few years, we have seen record numbers of new arrivals, from countries such as Angola, the Democratic Republic of Congo, Haiti, and Venezuela, arriving in Maine seeking safety and protection. ILAP has responded to the growing need by scaling up our core services and developing innovative projects to reach more people.

Despite these successes, we continue to be outpaced by the exponential increase in need for immigration legal services. In 2024, we were **forced to turn away an estimated 550 people** who were eligible for ILAP services and needed legal assistance because we did not have the capacity to help them. We know that there are many more individuals who do not come to ILAP because they have heard that we are unable to help everyone.

Unfortunately, when ILAP does not have the capacity to help a particular person, they are forced to navigate our complex and unjust immigration system alone, risking loss of legal status, loss of work authorization, and deportation. Research has long shown that members of mixed-status or undocumented families suffer many adverse effects, such as poorer health outcomes, higher rates of homelessness and food insecurity, and lower rates of educational attainment.

We continue to be concerned about the expansion of the unauthorized practice of immigration law in Maine by individuals and organizations, as well as the confusion experienced by new arrivals who think they are seeking assistance from someone who is qualified to give immigration law guidance. Frequently, after receiving help elsewhere and having their applications rejected, applicants come to ILAP for guidance. Our staff try to fix the damage, but sometimes we cannot and individuals are left at risk of losing their case and being deported.

Conclusion

When people come to ILAP, they are all too often in crisis. They are facing violence and even death, separation from family members, or the loss of work authorization and, with it, security. ILAP is the only organization in Maine with attorney expertise and decades of experience to respond in these moments and help people seek safety, be with family, and pursue a better life. But unfortunately, the need for free, accessible, and expert guidance from a trusted advocate is outpacing our growth.

At the same time, the last few years have shown us that we must expect uncertainty and be ready to respond no matter what happens across the country or around the globe. The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees estimates there are more than 120 million people worldwide who have been forcibly displaced from their homes, and much of ILAP's work is directly impacted by these global trends.

As we look ahead to 2025, we are expecting even higher levels of demand for free immigration legal services across the state and will work to sustain our core services and special projects. At the same time, we expect we will need to increase capacity to address emerging needs as the new administration begins to implement its anti-immigrant agenda, including a huge number of new policies in rapid succession, increased enforcement actions, and increased use of detention. Unfortunately, it is likely that many these policies will negatively impact Maine's immigrant communities, targeting people applying for asylum, people in immigration court, and people with Temporary Protected Status.

MCLSF is an important source of funding for ILAP, increasing to approximately 9% of our revenue in 2024 because of increased state support. In addition, approximately 11% of last year's funding was from state grants, 9% from the Maine's Interest on Lawyers' Trust Accounts (IOLTA) program, 29% from private and corporate grants, 39% from individual donations and special events, and 3% from interest and other revenue. Because ILAP is ineligible for most federal funding, MCLSF remains one of our only reliable revenue sources from year to year.

On behalf of ILAP's Board of Directors, staff, volunteers, and clients, I would like to thank the Commission for their continued support of Maine's civil legal aid community. We very much appreciate your generous investment in ILAP's mission again in 2024. Our strong network of support, of which MCLSF is a vital part, makes our work possible and helps Mainers with low incomes navigate the immigration system we have now while we push for lasting structural change.

Respectfully submitted:

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Susan Roche". The signature is fluid and cursive, with a long horizontal stroke extending to the right.

Susan Roche, Esq.
Executive Director

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Legal Services for Maine Elders Annual Report to the Maine Civil Legal Services Fund Commission Calendar Year 2024

This is the Annual Report from Legal Services for Maine Elders (“LSE”) to the Maine Civil Legal Services Fund Commission (the “Commission”) regarding LSE’s services and accomplishments in 2024. The financial support provided to LSE by the Maine Civil Legal Services Fund (“MCLSF” or the “Fund”) is used to provide free legal help to disadvantaged older adults when their basic human needs are at stake. This includes things like shelter, sustenance, income, safety, public benefits, health care, and self-determination.

During this reporting period, the Fund provided 41% of the funding required to provide the legal services described in this report. This is a substantial increase over 2022 (24%). This is the direct result of a one-time appropriation LSE benefited from over the past two years. This report describes only services that are supported in part by the Fund. See **Attachment A** for summary information about additional services provided by LSE that are not supported by the Fund.

STATISTICAL INFORMATION

Number of People Served and Legal Matters Handled

In 2024, LSE provided free legal help to 3,995 older Mainers in 4,795 cases involving a broad range of civil legal problems, including the following:

- Elder abuse and neglect;
- Financial exploitation;
- Debt collection and creditor harassment;
- Housing, including eviction and foreclosure defense;
- Nursing home eligibility and other long-term care matters;
- Medicare appeals;
- Social Security appeals;
- MaineCare, food stamp, heating assistance, General Assistance, and other public assistance program appeals;
- Guardianship limitation or revocation; and
- Financial and health care powers of attorney.

This was a 27% increase in legal matters handled over the prior year. LSE was able to help 776 more people in 2024 than we helped in 2023 and 1,003 more than 2022. These improvements in access to services are the direct result of increased funding. Unfortunately, 505 callers were turned away at intake in 2024. These are callers who would have received Helpline services if LSE had not restricted intake to ensure we were able to serve all callers who were facing emergencies.

The number of cases that were emergency calls requiring a higher level of service and immediate attention continues to trend much higher than pre-pandemic levels (2019-761; 2020-1,250; 2021-1,438; 2022-1,528; 2023-1,366; 2024-2,336). Emergency calls made up 49% of the total legal matters opened. Every caller with an emergency legal problem was served on the day they called or on the next business day. Cases that LSE defines as emergencies run across a range of case types including eviction, foreclosure, public benefit denials and reductions, resident rights and elder abuse, but the common theme across all of them is that an older person is facing a legal problem that puts their housing, health, and/or safety at imminent risk. These are cases where a person is living in an unsafe situation, is threatened with loss of housing, or is being denied critically needed public benefits. Legal problems that are emergencies are time sensitive and more resource intensive to address.

LSE provided this level of service with a small staff. The direct legal services staffing in 2024 included: 0.80 full time equivalent (FTE) Litigation Director; 0.65 FTE Helpline Director; 2.0 FTE Intake Paralegal; 3.70 FTE Helpline Attorneys; 1.00 FTE Elder Abuse Paralegal; and 10.60 FTE Staff Attorneys. This is a total of only 18.75 FTEs of direct legal services staff (including supervisory staff). In 2024, LSE doubled intake capacity and added 1.00 FTE in Helpline Attorney capacity as compared to 2023.

See **Attachment B** for graphs that present the data included above.

Types of Cases Handled

The following charts break down the number of cases handled in 2023 and 2024 by general case type.

2023 LSE CLIENT SERVICES BY GENERAL CASE TYPE	
Case Type	Total
Housing (976)	26%
Self Determination (851)	23%
Consumer/Finance (724)	19%
Health Care (502)	13%
Individual Rights (includes elder abuse and exploitation) (295)	8%
Income Maintenance (229)	6%
Family (110)	3%
Miscellaneous (88)	2%
Employment (2)	--
Total Cases (3,777)	100%

2024 LSE CLIENT SERVICES BY GENERAL CASE TYPE	
Case Type	Total
Housing (1,267)	26%
Self Determination (1,162)	24%
Consumer/Finance (874)	18%
Health Care (751)	16%
Individual Rights (includes elder abuse and exploitation) (343)	7%
Income Maintenance (227)	5%
Family (120)	3%
Miscellaneous (50)	1%
Employment (1)	--
Total Cases (4,795)	100%

The greatest overall demands for LSE services based upon the total number of legal matters handled (not necessarily time spent on the cases) were in the areas of housing (public and private rental housing issues, foreclosures, evictions), self-determination/aging preparedness (probate referrals, powers of attorney, advance directives, will referrals), consumer issues (debt collection, consumer fraud, creditor harassment), and access to health care (Medicare and MaineCare).

Status of Matters Handled

The reported matters were all opened during 2024 and are reported regardless of whether or not they were closed in 2024. LSE consistently reports matters opened for the reporting period in question to all funders unless specifically asked for other data. This ensures the data provided by LSE may be compared from year to year and does not include any duplicate information.

Of these 4,795 matters, 16% (762) were handled by Staff Attorneys as potential litigation matters, and 84% (4,033) were assisted by Helpline Attorneys. A further breakdown of the level of service is as follows (from most to least resource intensive): 8% extended representation services; 39% counsel and advice; 44% information and referral; and 9% clients who no longer desired services after making initial contact with LSE or who could not be reached again after making initial contact.

Demographic Information

The clients served were 34% male, 64% female, and 1% transgender (with 5 declining to answer). All clients served were sixty years of age or older, and 58% were 70 years of age or older. Nine percent of those served were veterans. While LSE serves

both socially and economically needy older adults, 86% of LSE’s clients were below 250% of the federal poverty level and 41% were below 100% of the federal poverty level. Those clients who are not below 250% of the poverty level typically receive only basic information and a referral with the rare exception of a financial exploitation case that may be handled by LSE when a referral to the private bar is not possible due to the time sensitive nature of the case.

Geographic Distribution of Cases

LSE provides services on a statewide basis. LSE’s clients are generally distributed across the state in proportion to the distribution of older people across the state though we do have some underserved areas. To the extent resources allow, LSE focuses customized outreach on underserved parts of the state. Year after year, LSE serves clients in nearly every township in Maine. We attribute this to the strength of our statewide partner and referral relationships. The charts provided as **Attachment C** provide data regarding the geographic distribution of LSE’s clients in 2024. This includes a chart comparing LSE’s service data to demographic data.

DESCRIPTION OF LSE’S SERVICES

Since its establishment in 1974, LSE has been providing free, high quality legal services to socially and economically needy older adults who are 60 years of age or older when their basic human needs are at stake. This includes things like shelter, sustenance, income, safety, public benefits, health care, and self-determination. LSE offers several different types and levels of service in an attempt to stretch its limited resources as far as possible.

The services provided by LSE include the following: 1) brief services, advice, and counseling to clients throughout Maine by the LSE Helpline (2.0 FTE intake, 3.7 FTE Helpline Attorney); 2) litigation services by eleven Staff Attorneys (10.60 FTEs) located across the state; and 3) outreach conducted throughout the state including via a website, direct mail, and presentations to referral sources. As noted in **Attachment A**, LSE also engages in extensive public policy advocacy, but that work is not supported by the Fund.

The case types accepted by LSE, the level of service provided by LSE in each case type (information and referral only; telephone assistance only; or full representation), and the range of possible desired outcomes for each case type are governed by comprehensive written client service guidelines that are consistently applied on a statewide basis (“LSE Targeting Guidelines”). The LSE Targeting Guidelines ensure LSE is thoughtfully putting its limited resources to work where they will have the greatest impact. The Guidelines also ensure an equitable distribution of LSE’s resources and services across the entire state.

Most LSE clients receive help only via telephone. The most intensive level of service, providing a Staff Attorney to represent an elder in a court or administrative proceeding, is offered only where an elder is at risk of losing their home, can’t access

essential health or other public benefits, or is a victim of abuse or exploitation, and there is no other legal resource available to help the elder. Overall, LSE is able to improve the situation of those who receive services 86% of the time.

The remainder of this report describes these three components in more detail and highlights accomplishments in the past year.

Statewide Helpline Services

LSE operates a statewide Helpline that provides all older people in Maine, regardless of where they live in the state, with direct and free access to an attorney toll-free over the telephone. The Helpline is the centralized point of intake for the vast majority of the legal services provided by LSE. LSE's Helpline accepts calls Monday through Friday during regular business hours. Calls are answered in person by two Intake Paralegals. Those calling after hours are able to leave a message, and calls are returned by an Intake Paralegal the next business day. Once an intake is complete, all eligible callers with legal problems with which LSE assists, except those calling about an emergency situation, receive a call back from a Helpline Attorney in the order the calls were received. All emergency calls are handled immediately. **In 2024, all callers (2,336) with emergency legal problems received same day or next business day services.** Other callers received a call back from a Helpline Attorney within four to six days on average. **LSE's intake system is set up to ensure that anyone trying to reach LSE to ask for legal help with a civil legal matter is able to speak with someone about their problem.**

The Helpline Attorneys provide legal assistance to older people exclusively via telephone. This is the level of service received by 84% of the people receiving help from LSE though most desire and could benefit from more extensive help. Only a small subset of case types are referred to the nearest Staff Attorney for in person representation. Because Helpline services are much less expensive to deliver than the Staff Attorney services, this overall approach stretches LSE's limited resources as far as possible. LSE's Helpline services are provided at an average cost per case of only approximately \$122.81.

The Helpline received over 12,000 calls in 2024, and these calls were handled by two Intake Paralegals. About 60% of those callers were referred to other resources because the callers were calling on behalf of someone else, did not have legal problems, or were not eligible for LSE's services. In addition to making social service referrals, referrals are made by the Helpline, when appropriate, to other legal services providers (in particular, for those under 60), private attorneys, and other existing resources (e.g., the Attorney General's Consumer Division or Adult Protective Services) to take advantage of and ensure there is not any duplication of other available resources.

LSE maintains a panel of referral attorneys who have agreed to provide reduced fee or *pro bono* services when a client is below 200% of the federal poverty level. The panel has 117 members from across the state. The panel is rapidly shrinking as more and

more attorneys retire, and LSE struggles to replace them. LSE's panel includes lawyers who practice in substantive areas that are in great demand by callers to the Helpline, but are not handled by LSE, including things like MaineCare planning, real estate, probate and estate planning. LSE has a joint project with the Elder Law Section of the Maine State Bar Association to support LSE in recruiting referral attorneys to the panel. In addition to making full fee referrals to panel members, LSE made 25 *pro bono* and 63 reduced fee referrals to referral panel members in 2024. LSE was unable to refer 58 cases because there were no panel members able to take the referrals.

Statewide Litigation/Staff Attorney Services

The other primary component of LSE's service delivery system involves providing litigation services to older adults through Staff Attorneys who historically worked out of local Area Offices that were co-located at the local Area Agencies on Aging (except in Augusta) but are now working from home offices. This level of service was provided to 16% of those seeking help from LSE (762 cases). These more resource intensive services are provided by eleven Staff Attorneys (one is part-time) who each cover assigned geographic areas of the state and also work together in regional teams.

The Staff Attorneys provide legal services for older people with legal problems that place them at immediate risk of harm and may require litigation in order to obtain a favorable resolution. This includes things like elder abuse/financial exploitation, MaineCare and other public benefit appeals, and evictions and foreclosures. LSE Staff Attorneys must be thoroughly familiar with District, Superior, and Probate Court procedures as well as with administrative hearing procedures.

LSE rigorously merit assesses cases before committing these intensive resources to a case, but once cases are accepted for full representation, Staff Attorneys are successful 74% of the time in stopping abuse, recovering homes and assets that have been stolen, saving homes from foreclosure that families have lived in for decades, stopping evictions and/or preserving housing subsidies, and helping older people obtain needed home care and other long-term care services that allow them to continue living in their own homes longer.

Outreach and Education

LSE provides legal information to the public through public presentations, print material, and its website. LSE distributed over 12,000 LSE brochures in 2024. LSE information is posted at the courts, Community Action Programs, Social Security offices, congregate meal sites, Department of Health and Human Services offices, and Area Agencies on Aging. LSE materials are also distributed directly to homebound residents through the Meals on Wheels program and by direct mail to a broad range of referral sources including all town offices, food banks, homeless shelters, assisted living facilities, home health agencies, hospice programs, and nursing facilities. In addition to the distribution of print materials, LSE's Staff Attorneys do direct outreach with key referral sources based upon statewide and regional outreach plans. To magnify the

impact of the direct outreach, LSE focuses on connecting with professionals who are potential referral sources rather than trying to directly reach older people. LSE also continued to focus in 2024 on reaching out to new and different referral sources in an effort to ensure services are reaching underserved populations and areas of the state.

The LSE website includes an extensive online elder rights handbook. The handbook includes information on elder abuse, powers of attorney, advance directives, housing rights, consumer debt problems, MaineCare estate recovery, MaineCare eligibility for nursing home coverage, Medicare Part D, and many other topics. The website provides a valuable resource not just to older people in Maine, but also to their family members and caregivers. The design of the online handbook meets all national standards for online materials for older users and is accessible on a wide range of devices. LSE also distributes hard copies of the handbook upon request.

LEADERS IN THE FIGHT AGAINST ELDER ABUSE

Elder abuse remains a top priority systemic issue for LSE. In addition to providing legal representation to 497 victims of elder abuse, up from 443 in 2023 and 384 in 2022, LSE is a leader in efforts to prevent elder abuse and improve the community response when it does occur. LSE provides infrastructure support for the Maine Council for Elder Abuse Prevention including maintaining the website and handling registration for two conferences that are held every year. The Council includes over 80 members from a broad range of public and private organizations as well as individuals. The Council focuses on raising awareness about elder abuse and improving the response by providing multi-disciplinary training for professionals who work with victims. In addition, LSE Staff Attorneys serve on local Elder Abuse Task Forces where they exist. These groups enable professionals from many different disciplines to work together to raise awareness of elder abuse and improve the local response.

LSE's Executive Director continues to Co-Chair the Elder Justice Coordinating Partnership (EJCP), created by Executive Order in 2019, which includes 22 members from a broad range of public and private sector leaders. The EJCP published an Elder Justice Roadmap in January of 2022 that focuses on reducing elder abuse in Maine and improving the response to elder abuse. Since the fall of 2023, the EJCP has been Co-Chaired by Elizabeth Gattine, Senior Policy Analyst at the Governor's Office of Policy Innovation and the Future and Cabinet on Aging Coordinator. Maine is one of eight states to receive a grant from the National Center for State and Tribal Elder Justice Coalitions. This grant was awarded to the Governor's Office of Policy Innovation and the Future. The grant supports a full time staff person to support the work of the EJCP.

OUTCOMES MEASUREMENT

Using electronic case management software called Legal Server, LSE is able to collect, maintain, and analyze comprehensive data regarding the demographics of those served and the scope and nature of its services. This includes things like the location of the individual served, the type of case, and the specific outcomes achieved. Outcomes are assigned to every case that is closed based upon the range of potential outcomes for

the given case type. Information from this database is used to monitor compliance with all funder requirements and commitments, including the MCLSF. In addition to monitoring outcomes achieved across all case types, LSE also conducts periodic client satisfaction surveys for our Helpline services. Most callers who are not satisfied with the services are unhappy because they face problems outside of LSE's scope of services.

LSE service and outcome data is reviewed on a regular basis by the LSE Executive Director and its Board of Directors, and this data analysis influences decisions regarding how to allocate resources across the state and how to focus ongoing outreach efforts. In addition to monitoring for compliance with MCLSF commitments, LSE routinely provides extensive statistical and narrative reports to other key funders, including the Maine Justice Foundation, United Way agencies, the Area Agencies on Aging, the Office of Aging and Disability Services, and the Administration for Community Living.

LSE operates under a strategic plan that includes measurable objectives in five areas. This includes increasing the number of older adults who seek and obtain help, helping older adults maintain safe and affordable housing, helping older adults access publicly funded health care services, increasing the financial security of Maine's older adults, and helping older adults to live their lives free from abuse, neglect, or exploitation. The LSE Board monitors progress under the plan.

UNMET AND UNDERSERVED NEEDS

LSE is required as a part of this annual report to provide information regarding the unmet and underserved legal service needs of older people in Maine. The unmet need continues to grow. There are at least three major drivers behind the significant and growing unmet need for legal services among Maine's older population.

1. Maine is the oldest state in the nation, and the number of older people living in Maine is growing at an incredible rate.

By 2030, it is expected that nearly one out of every three Maine residents will be over 60. That means there will be over 460,000 older people living in Maine.

2. There is a very high poverty rate among older Mainers, and older people face many other unique challenges.

In Maine, 18% of older people live below 150% of the poverty level, and nearly one third live below 300% of the poverty level. Seventy percent of low-income older people receive Social Security as their sole source of income compared to only half of older people who are above poverty levels. The high poverty rate among older people in Maine does not tell the whole story. Older Mainers with low incomes live on fixed incomes and face additional financial challenges, including a high tax rate, high medical costs, high food costs, high electricity costs, and an aging housing stock heated with oil. Many older people in Maine are also extremely vulnerable in other ways. Under America's Health Rankings for Seniors, Maine ranks 28th for community support

expenditures for those age 60 and older (with 1 being best) and 25th for housing cost burden of those 65 and older.

3. Older people who are low-income face frequent legal problems.

Older people face more frequent legal problems than the general low-income population and are at higher risk of harm when facing a legal problem. **A legal needs study conducted in Maine in 2011 by the University of Maine Center on Aging revealed that 56% of Maine’s older people with low incomes had experienced a legal problem in the past year (this went up to 67% for low income older people 70 years of age or older).¹ This is consistent with a more recent national study showing that 56% of low-income older people’s households experienced a civil legal problem in the past year, and a stunning 10% experienced six or more legal problems per year.² LSE is meeting at most 15% of the need for services.**

Complicating the landscape is the fact that without ready access to free legal assistance, Maine elders who can’t afford a lawyer are most likely to “do nothing” about their legal problem. A national survey that is consistent with prior Maine surveys showed that 87% of older people with low-incomes who experience legal problems receive inadequate or no help because they don’t know where to seek help, decide to deal with the problem on their own, don’t have time to deal with the problem, or aren’t sure they have a legal problem.³ **Doing nothing when facing a legal problem like abuse, foreclosure, eviction, or overwhelming medical debt quickly leads to a downward spiral in what had previously been a productive and independent person’s life.**

SUMMARY

With increased support from the Fund, LSE was able to assist 776 more people with 1,018 more legal problems in 2024 as compared to 2023. This included 2,336 emergency legal problems. LSE is pleased to report that just as was the case in 2022 and 2023, every single older person calling LSE with an emergency legal problem in 2024 received free legal help from LSE. At the same time, 505 people who sought help with less serious problems were turned away to ensure those with emergency needs could be served. We know that over 50% of older people in Maine with low incomes face at least one legal problem each year, and many face multiple legal problems in a year. Even with the increases in funding in 2024, LSE is turning people away who could benefit from help. We estimate we are meeting less than 15% of the actual need for free legal help. This leaves far too many older Mainers without access to an attorney when facing legal problems that will keep them from meeting their basic human needs.

Prepared by: Jaye L. Martin, Executive Director

¹ Legal Needs Assessment of Older Adults in Maine: 2011 Survey Findings from Key Populations of Older Adults, University of Maine Center on Aging, December, 2011.

² Justice Gap Measurement Survey, The Justice Gap: Measuring the Unmet Civil Legal Needs of Low Income Americans, 2017.

³ Legal Services Corporation, The Justice Gap, June, 2017, page 47.

ATTACHMENT A LEGAL SERVICES FOR MAINE ELDERS

Additional services provided by LSE that are not supported by the Fund

Medicare Advocacy Services

LSE is a vital part of Maine’s legal services system as well as its eldercare network, which includes the Office of Aging and Disability Services, the Area Agencies on Aging, the Long-Term Care Ombudsman Program, Adult Protective Services, Office of Securities, and the state’s public guardianship program. Working closely with these partners, LSE provides comprehensive, statewide services to older people in Maine. This includes the provision of non-legal services that are complementary to LSE’s core legal services.

LSE has three significant statewide Medicare advocacy programs that are funded entirely by restricted federal and/or state grants (and receive no support from the Fund). This includes: 1) services provided by LSE as a part of the State Health Insurance Assistance Program (“SHIP”); 2) services provided as a part of the Senior Medicare Patrol (“SMP”) program, and 3) LSE’s Medicare Part D Appeals Unit. The SHIP and SMP programs provide older and disabled Maine residents with information and assistance on health insurance matters, in particular Medicare and MaineCare. The Part D Appeals Unit assists people who are having trouble affording their prescription medications. In 2024, the LSE Medicare Part D Appeals Unit assisted 756 low-income Maine residents who were being denied access to needed prescription drugs under Medicare Part D.

Systemic Work and Public Policy Advocacy

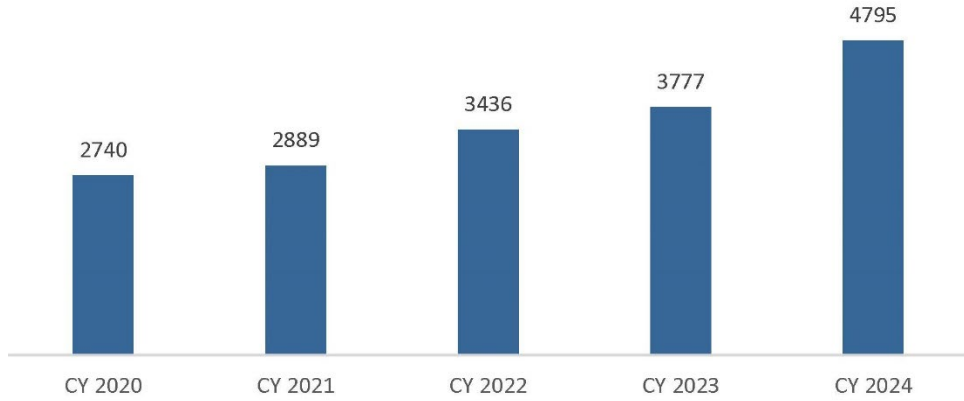
Through its full time Public Policy Advocate and the efforts of other LSE staff, LSE participates in two general areas of systemic advocacy: legislative work and administrative work, including task forces and work groups. This work enables LSE to have a much larger impact on the policies and systems affecting older people in Maine than would be possible if LSE were to limit its activities to individual representations. The LSE Board of Directors has adopted guidelines which govern the nature and scope of this systemic advocacy work. These legislative and systemic activities are not supported by the Fund.

ATTACHMENT B

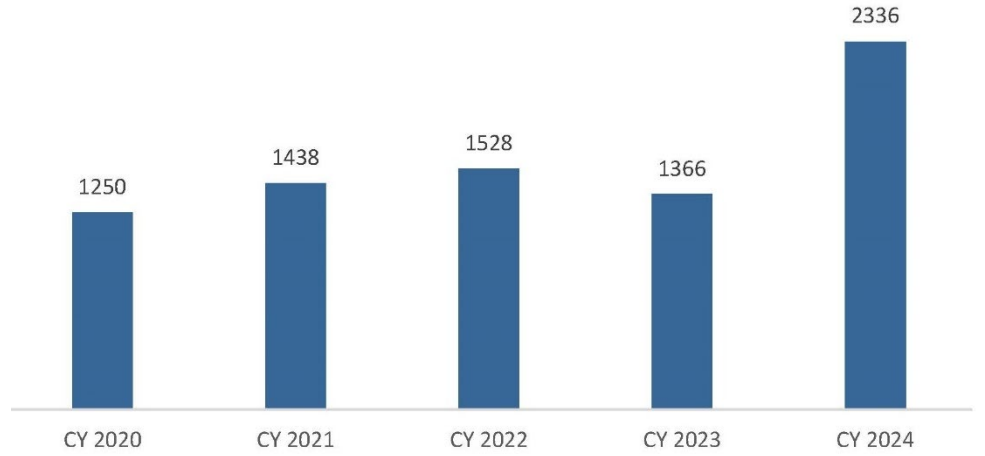
LEGAL SERVICES FOR MAINE ELDERS

Free Legal Help for Older Mainers

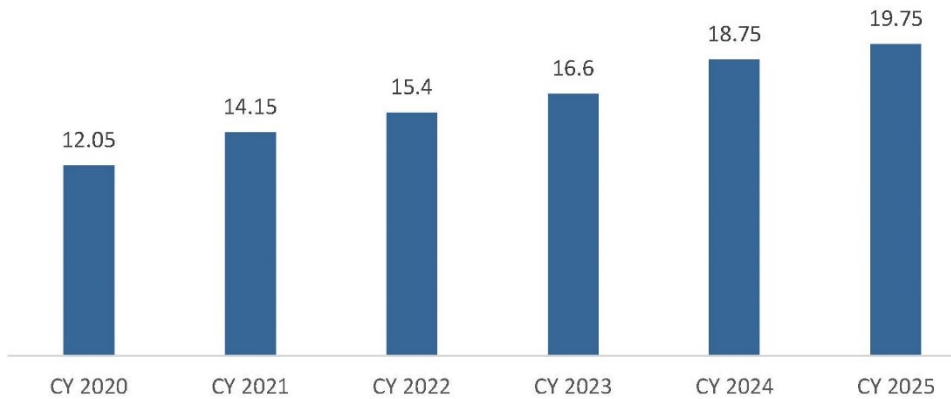
Total Legal Matters Opened



Emergency Matters Handled



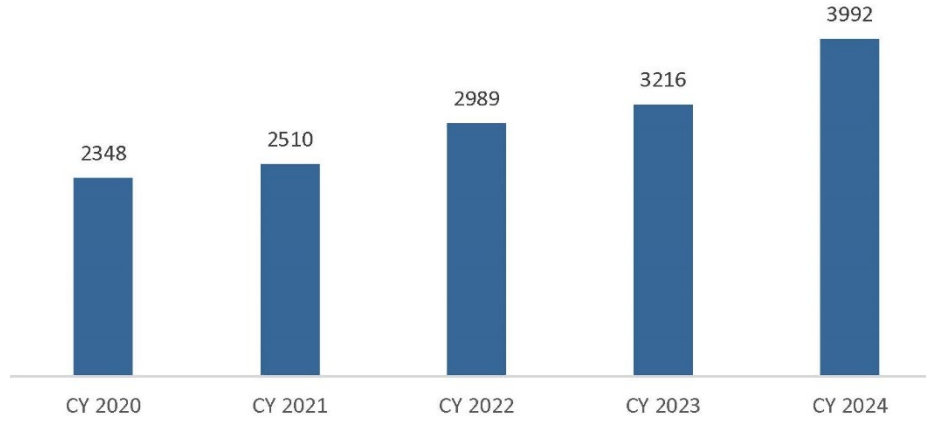
Direct Legal Services Staff



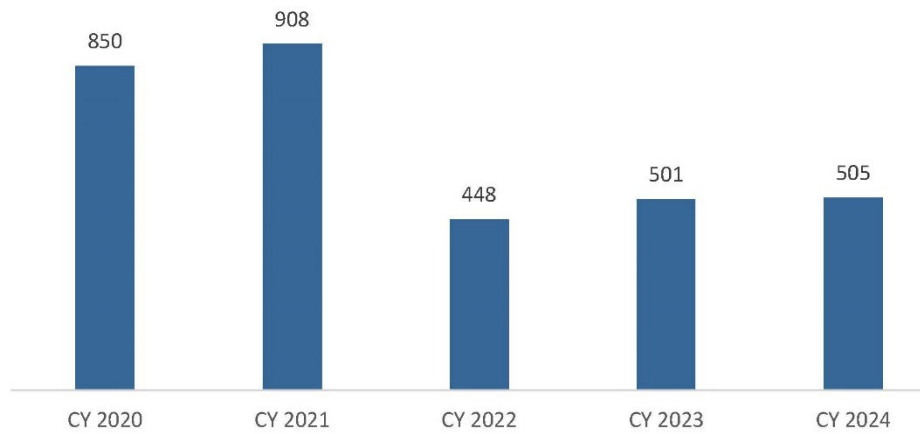


ATTACHMENT B

Total Clients Served



Number of Eligible Callers Turned Away



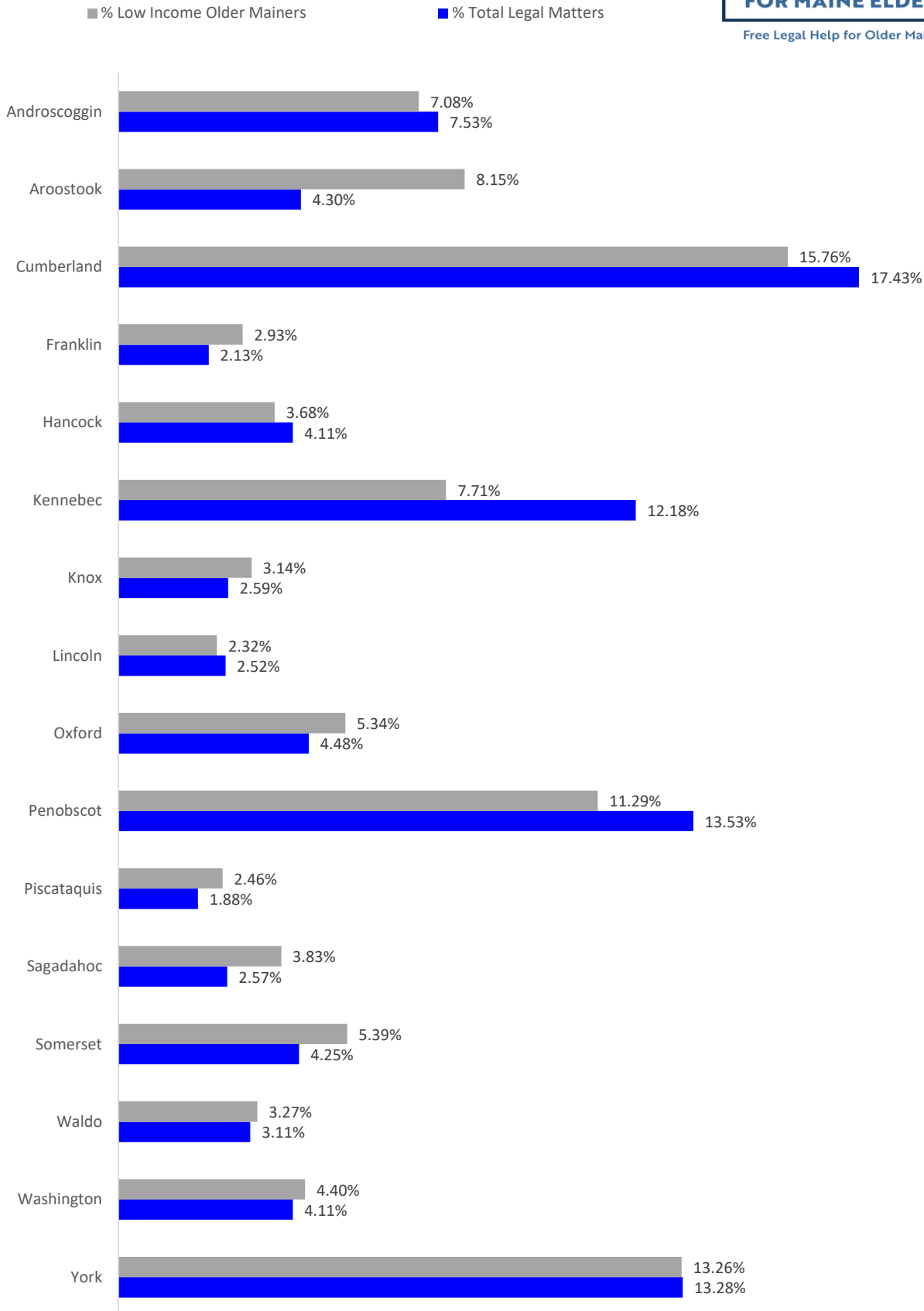
**ATTACHMENT C
LEGAL SERVICES FOR MAINE ELDERS**

Geographic Distribution of Services

	LSE 2024 STATISTICS	
	Total Clients Served	% of Total LSE Clients Served by County
Androscoggin	303	8%
Aroostook	176	4%
Cumberland	714	18%
Franklin	85	2%
Hancock	169	4%
Kennebec	474	12%
Knox	109	3%
Lincoln	100	2%
Oxford	184	5%
Penobscot	547	14%
Piscataquis	72	2%
Sagadahoc	105	3%
Somerset	167	4%
Waldo	122	3%
Washington	139	3%
York	529	13%
Total	3,995	100%

ATTACHMENT C

Legal Matters CY 2024 YTD as of 12.31.24 Compared to Percent of Low Income Older Mainers by County



* Percent of low income older Mainers updated with data from ACS 2023 five year estimate of poverty status in the past 12 months.

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2024 Annual Report to the Maine Civil Legal Services Fund Commission January 2025

Maine Equal Justice (MEJ) is proud to share how the vital support of the Maine Civil Legal Services Fund (MCLSF) has allowed us to improve access to justice across all sixteen counties. In 2024, MCLSF provided nearly half (49.75%) of the funding essential to sustain our legal representation, administrative advocacy, and outreach and training programs. As our single largest source of multi-year funding, MCLSF serves as the foundation that enables us to meet the diverse legal needs of Maine’s most vulnerable residents.

Over the past year, MEJ has not only met but exceeded the goals outlined in our 2024-2025 proposal submitted in the fall of 2023. By addressing urgent community needs, we have delivered on our commitment to provide essential legal services, foster economic opportunities, and meet the basic needs of individuals and families living at or below 200% of the federal poverty line. Through collaborative efforts with other organizations, providers, and agencies, we have maximized our impact, ensuring that all Mainers—regardless of location or circumstance—have access to the justice they deserve.

BACKGROUND

In 1996, recognizing the limitations imposed by new federal restrictions on funding for legal representation in class-action litigation, administrative advocacy, and legislative advocacy, Maine's legal community came together to find a solution. The result was the creation of Maine Equal Justice Partners, now known as Maine Equal Justice, to fill the crucial gap in advocating for those with low incomes across all branches of government.

Dedicated to enhancing economic security, opportunity, and equity in Maine, MEJ employs a multifaceted approach: (1) public policy advocacy within the legislature¹ and governmental agencies; (2) impactful legal representation and strategic litigation addressing systemic issues; and (3) widespread outreach and training on vital supports that prevent or lift individuals out of poverty. Using many tools, MEJ not only directly advocates for clients but also pioneers innovative solutions aimed at reducing poverty on a broad scale. Our focus is on issues impacting people's daily lives, most importantly access to healthcare, food, housing, income, employment, and education and training opportunities.

¹ Maine Civil Legal Services funds are not used to support MEJ’s legislative work or lobbying activities.

INFORMATION REQUESTED by the COMMISSION

Maine Equal Justice relies on funds from the MCLSF to support the services described below.

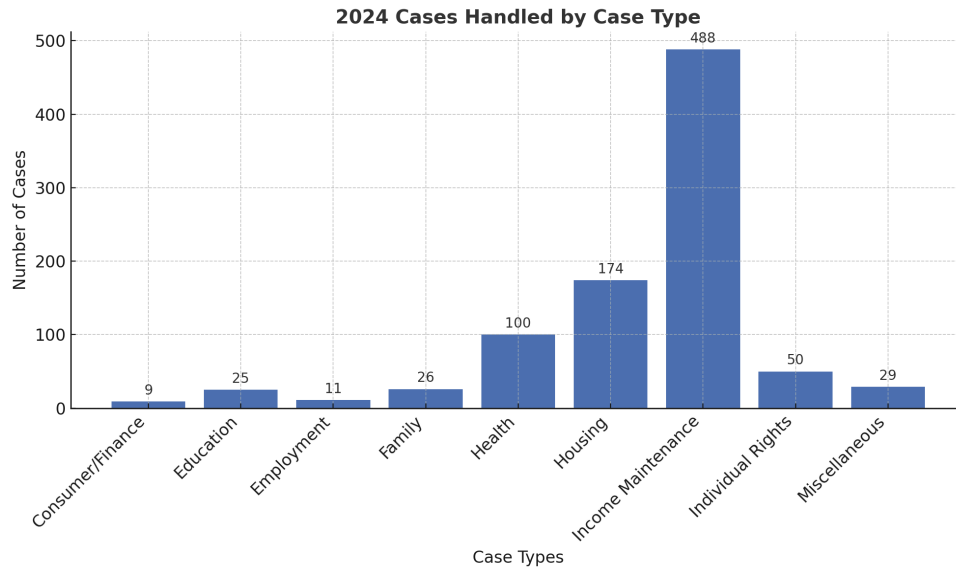
1. **Direct Legal Representation** (Advice, Referrals, Limited & Extended Representation, including Impact Litigation):

Maine Equal Justice provides essential legal assistance through a responsive toll-free telephone and online intake system, addressing challenges such as denied, terminated, or reduced public assistance, public health insurance, and access to education or training programs. Backed by deep expertise in state and federal laws, our team skillfully navigates the complexities of these systems to deliver effective solutions for those in need.

In addition to direct representation, MEJ serves as a trusted legal resource for organizations, agencies, and municipalities across Maine, offering specialized guidance on economic security programs to extend the reach of our impact. With each case we handle, we look beyond the immediate issue to uncover and address systemic barriers, ensuring long-term improvements that benefit individuals and communities alike.

Recognizing critical gaps in Maine's civil legal aid infrastructure, MEJ steps up to support individuals who might otherwise fall through the cracks. Many immigrants, including asylum seekers, face barriers to accessing legal assistance due to eligibility restrictions imposed on other providers. By taking on these cases—even when they lack broader systemic implications—MEJ underscores its steadfast commitment to serving all Maine communities and ensuring no one is left behind.

In 2024, MEJ handled **912 direct legal cases**. Most cases MEJ handled related to income maintenance, with a substantial number in housing and health care. MEJ handled more housing cases in 2024 than in prior years because of the increase in need in this area. Thanks to a temporary increase in the Maine Civil Legal Services Fund, MEJ has been able to increase capacity to take on more housing cases. In 2024, MEJ handled the following types of legal cases in the form of advice and referrals, and limited and full representation to clients throughout the state:



Impact litigation in 2024:

Maine Equal Justice pursued impact litigation to address the needs of clients with low income while also shaping policy impacting thousands of similarly situated individuals across the state. Here is a summary of our impact litigation in 2024:

Public Benefits:

Malloch v. DHHS (Maine Superior Court):

Challenges DHHS's decision regarding a town's compliance with the General Assistance statute, despite finding the town violated Ms. Malloch's rights by failing to record a fair hearing. Awaiting a court decision.

In Her Presence v. DHHS (Maine Law Court):

Seeks to ensure recipients of state-funded TANF benefits receive the same transitional childcare and transportation benefits as federally funded TANF recipients. Awaiting a decision from the Maine Law Court.

Halsey, et al. v. FEDCAP (1st Circuit Court of Appeals):

Addresses TANF recipients' rights under the ASPIRE program administered by FEDCAP. The court ruled that plaintiffs must exhaust administrative remedies before suing. We have now requested administrative hearings on behalf of named parties and one other individual and are set for a pre-hearing conference in March. (DHHS is arguing that we are not entitled to a hearing).

Housing:

Eviction Protection Project (Maine District Court):

Provides legal representation for individuals ineligible for other legal aid providers due to their

immigration status. Currently representing individuals facing evictions in Portland District Court and we will be expanding to other courts with HUD grant funding.

Marcello v. Burns Prop., LLC (Maine Superior Court):

Challenges unsafe housing conditions, including a bedbug infestation and water-damaged ceilings, under warranty of habitability, illegal eviction, and negligence claims. Currently in discovery.

Brown v. Town of Scarborough, et al. (Maine Federal District Court):

Challenges town policies that restrict housing for low-income individuals because they disproportionately affect Black and African people, perpetuate segregation, and violate constitutional and fair housing obligations. Awaiting a court decision.

Foreclosure and Consumer Law:

Consumer Data Industry Assoc. v. Frey (1st Circuit Court of Appeals):

Defends a Maine law protecting victims of economic abuse from having debts reported on their credit. The Maine District Court upheld the law, and the case is now on appeal. MEJ filed an amicus brief.

Finch v. U.S. Bank (Maine Law Court):

By a vote of 4-3 this case overturned homeowner protections that prevented a bank from repeatedly suing a homeowner for foreclosure after a final foreclosure judgment was entered in favor of the homeowner. Since the decision, the Committee on Judicial Ethics has recommended that one of the justices that was part of the 4-3 majority violated the canon of judicial ethics. MEJ filed an amicus brief on behalf of the homeowner.

Fuller v. WVMF (Maine Federal District Court):

The court ruled that Finch v. U.S. Bank cannot be applied retroactively to judgments issued before the Finch decision. WVMF has filed a motion to amend this ruling.

2. Administrative Advocacy:

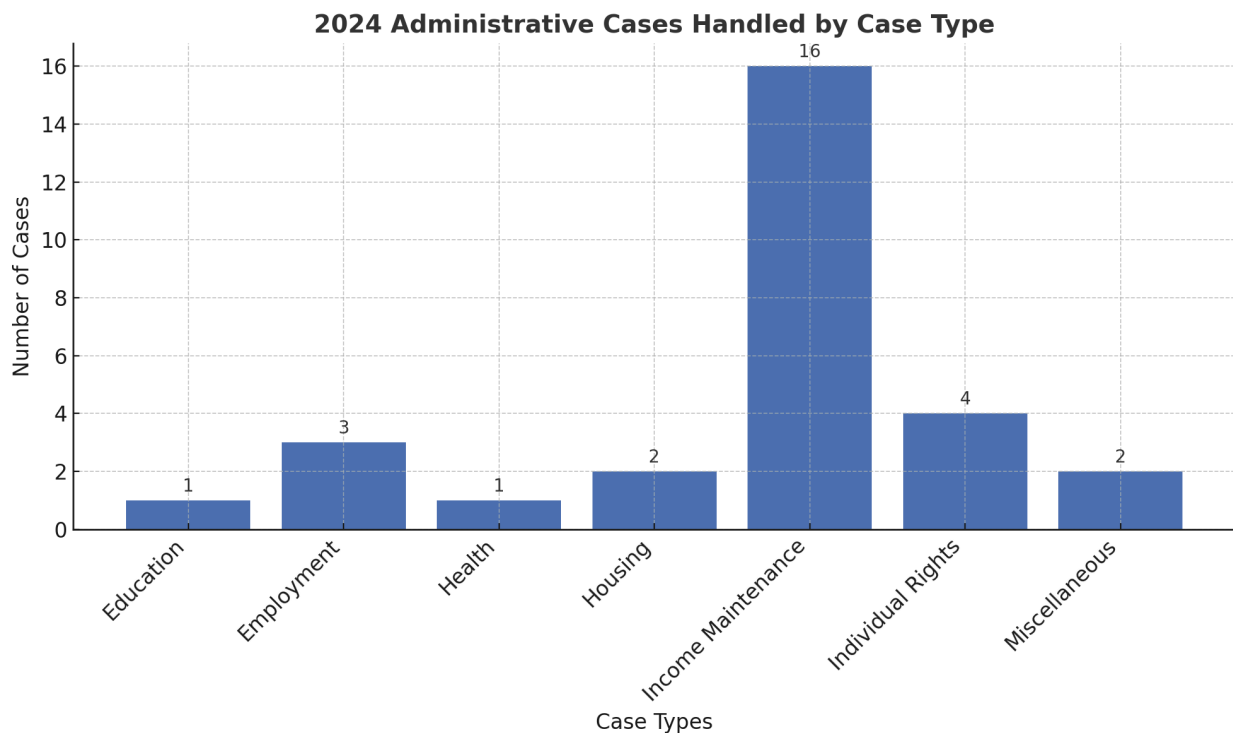
Maine Equal Justice's advocacy before government administrative agencies is informed by issues identified through:

1. **Direct client services**, where we see firsthand the challenges people face;
2. **Community involvement and coalition work**, amplifying the voices of those with lived experience;
3. **Outreach and training activities** for individuals with low incomes and the agencies that serve them; and
4. **Active participation** in work groups, commissions, and committees that shape policies affecting our clients.

MEJ engages in administrative advocacy at both the state and federal levels across all focus areas. Administrative agencies play a critical role in defining and implementing laws through regulations

and rules, with profound impacts on individuals with low income. MEJ works to ensure fairness, transparency, and due process at this level, advocating for clarity in the application of laws and resolving ambiguities in statutes. By so doing, MEJ clarifies eligibility and services covered, which improves the ability of other providers and agencies assisting people with low income to efficiently use their resources. This also helps our clients navigate a complex and confusing system to get the help they need.

In 2024, MEJ submitted formal comments on five proposed rules at the state level and handled 29 administrative cases, addressing a wide range of critical issues. MEJ handled the following types of administrative cases with the support of the MCLSF:



MEJ collaborated with state agencies including the Maine Department of Health and Human Services (DHHS), Maine Department of Labor (DOL), and MaineHousing to address the needs of people with low income. MEJ provided recommendations for systemic improvements based on research, policy expertise, and community input, and provided technical support and assistance to implement changes to meet people’s immediate and longer-term needs.

3. Training, Education and Outreach

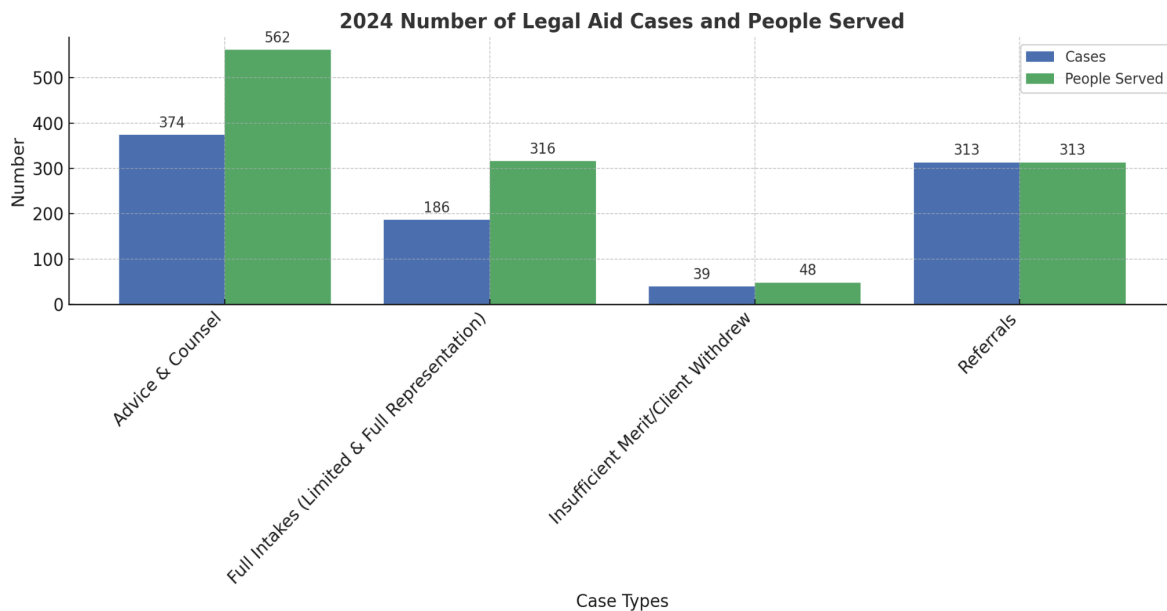
Maine Equal Justice provides outreach and training on public benefits and programs for low-income community members and the agencies and providers who assist them. We impart critical information on Maine’s economic security programs and how to access them. At the same time, we learn about potential barriers and issues faced by people accessing benefits and about systemic problems that need to be addressed. In 2024, MEJ conducted **18 virtual and in-person training**

events throughout the state, reaching over **580 individuals**, including staff from social service agencies, health centers, and individuals living with low income.

MEJ’s direct training, education, and outreach is supplemented by our website (www.mejp.org), which contains a wealth of client education materials and information on public assistance programs, public health insurance, and training and educational programs. In 2024, MEJ produced and shared resources related to health coverage, food security, immigrant program eligibility, General Assistance, and heating assistance.

Number of people served as a result of the award received from the MCLSF:

In 2024, Maine Equal Justice handled **912 cases**, impacting at least **1,237 individuals**. Of the 912 cases handled, **MEJ closed 847 cases**, and **54 cases are pending**. Thirty-nine cases closed because the client withdrew or failed to return, or due to insufficient merit.



These numbers, however, do not include those impacted by our administrative advocacy, which impacts similarly situated individuals, or by our training, education, and outreach efforts. Through our administrative advocacy MEJ impacted at least **91,732 individuals**. In addition, through statewide training sessions, MEJ impacted another **580 individuals**.

Demographic information about people served as a result of money received from the Fund:

Maine Equal Justice represents the interests of all Maine residents living in or near poverty, which is defined as less than 200% of the federal poverty level (FPL) or \$53,300 in annual income for a

family of three in 2025.² According to the most recent state data on the Kaiser Family Foundation website, there were **347,100 Maine people**, of all ages, living under 200% FPL in 2025.³

MEJ’s direct legal assistance targets people who are eligible for economic security programs. The following numbers provide a snapshot of the number of Maine people receiving public assistance from these programs as of September 2023:

- 12,768 people were enrolled in Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) that provides income support to families with children;
- 173,393 people were enrolled in the Food Assistance (SNAP) program that helps people with low income put food on the table; and
- 409,066 people were covered by MaineCare or CubCare, which provides public health insurance for people with low income who otherwise could not afford it.⁴

The geographical area served by the organization as a result of funds from the MCLSF:

MEJ provided direct legal assistance to individuals residing in all sixteen Maine counties in 2024.

County	# of Cases	# People Served
Androscoggin	62	87
Aroostook	24	32
Cumberland	361	481
Franklin	8	8
Hancock	19	19
Kennebec	76	98
Knox	6	6
Lincoln	19	22
Oxford	44	64
Penobscot	91	134
Piscataquis	15	15
Sagadahoc	27	41
Somerset	34	49
Waldo	25	32
Washington	26	30
York	75	119
Total	912	1237

² [2025 Poverty Guidelines: 48 Contiguous States \(all states except Alaska and Hawaii\)](#)

³ [KFF State Health Facts](#)

⁴ https://public.tableau.com/app/profile/dhhs.commissioner.s.office/viz/DHHSbytheNumbers_17079272307690/DHHSbytheNumbers

MEJ advanced two projects in 2024 that involved extensive outreach, education, and direct assistance. While these projects were not funded by MCLSF, they are coordinated with our legal services work described above.

1) Build HOPE Project: The aptly named **Higher Opportunity for Pathways to Employment (HOPE)** program was enacted by the Maine Legislature in 2018 to make higher education and training accessible for low-income parents. While HOPE provides critical support to help parents and caregivers return to school and succeed, many participants continue to face challenges meeting their basic needs and achieving their educational and career goals—particularly during unexpected emergencies.

The **Build HOPE Project** at Maine Equal Justice (MEJ) addresses these gaps by offering additional financial support, increasing the likelihood of success for students in the HOPE and Parents as Scholars (PaS) programs. In 2024, through this initiative, MEJ provided vital income support to **416 students**, helping them stay on track in their educational or training pursuits. MEJ’s legal services team supported the Build HOPE Project, working closely with students who faced legal barriers to ensure they were accessing all public benefits and supports for which they were eligible.

In addition to direct support, the Build HOPE Project conducted research that culminated in a comprehensive report published in early 2024.⁵ The report offers key findings and actionable recommendations for policymakers and stakeholders, providing a roadmap for designing systems and programs that effectively support economic mobility for families with children struggling to make ends meet.

By addressing immediate financial needs and advocating for systemic solutions, the Build HOPE Project plays a crucial role in empowering low-income parents to achieve their educational and economic goals, paving the way for greater opportunities and stability for their families.

2) Peer Workforce Navigator (PWN) Project: Maine Equal Justice (MEJ) is proud to be a founding partner of Maine's Peer Workforce Navigator (PWN) project, an innovative collaboration that helps individuals overcome the complexities of support programs and navigate their paths to economic stability. This initiative is a partnership among MEJ, the Maine Department of Labor (MDOL), Gateway Community Services, Maine AFL-CIO, Prosperity ME, Wabanaki Health and Wellness, and Food AND Medicine.

Through personalized consultations and regular clinics in Portland, Lewiston, and Bangor, MEJ and its PWN partners connect individuals to resources that promote gainful employment, career advancement, and economic security. The program focuses on:

1. Connecting community members to quality jobs and educational and training opportunities to foster long-term career growth.
2. Helping individuals access Unemployment Insurance (UI) benefits during critical times.

⁵ [Butler & Deprez. Post-Secondary Support for Parents with Low Incomes in Maine Charting Success, Bridging Gaps, and Illuminating Pathways for Economic Mobility. February 2024.](#)

3. Facilitating access to economic support programs that enable participants to achieve their career goals while maintaining economic stability.
4. Identifying systemic barriers to economic advancement and collaborating with MDOL to implement solutions that benefit workers statewide.

A unique strength of the PWN program is the close collaboration between MEJ's legal services team and Peer Workforce Navigators, which ensures that participants' legal needs are addressed comprehensively. The Volunteer Lawyers Project has also been an important partner, helping people access legal representation when people are improperly denied Unemployment Insurance.

In 2024, the PWN program achieved the following outcomes:

- 192 participants secured gainful employment.
- 98 participants accessed Unemployment Insurance benefits they were eligible for.
- 82 participants obtained health insurance coverage.
- 94 participants improved their food security.
- 124 participants gained access to additional income support programs.

By bridging gaps and breaking down systemic barriers, the PWN program exemplifies how collaborative, community-driven efforts can empower individuals to achieve economic security and improve their lives.

Outcome measurements used to determine compliance:

The proposal submitted for 2023-2024 is based upon the core legal representation and substantive work that MEJ pursues; therefore, we evaluate our work using outcome measurements that reflect our ability to achieve systemic reform.

Success Metrics for Brief Services, Advice, Referrals, and Extended Representation:

- Favorable case resolutions and negotiated settlements; and
- Comprehensive survey upon case closure, capturing client feedback.

Success Metrics for Administrative Advocacy:

- Acceptance of rulemaking comments;
- Implementation of administrative policy changes benefiting low-income individuals;
- Appointments to task forces, workgroups, and commissions, showcasing expertise recognition; and
- State requests for MEJ's analysis and assistance in meeting federal requirements.

Success Metrics for Training, Outreach, and Education:

- Extent of statewide outreach and training activities;
- Number of individuals trained, reflecting our impactful educational reach;
- Positive feedback from diverse organizations, including social service providers, family practice residency programs, associations, shelters, and community coalitions.

Information particular to each recipient organization regarding unmet and underserved needs:

Maine Equal Justice sustains its vital work through diverse funding sources, including the Maine Civil Legal Services Fund (MCLSF), Maine Justice Foundation, Campaign for Justice, foundations, and individual donors. Key funding pillars, such as Interest on Lawyers' Trust Accounts (IOLTA) and MCLSF, provide critical support for MEJ's legal services.

Rising living costs have intensified the challenges faced by many Mainers, leading to a surge in unmet basic needs and increased demand for legal assistance. The housing crisis is particularly dire: 72% of extremely low-income households in Maine spend over 30% of their income on rent, with many at risk of eviction and homelessness due to a severe shortage of affordable housing. In response, MEJ remains committed to addressing immediate needs while pursuing systemic solutions.

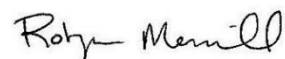
Thanks to additional one-time funding from the MCLSF, MEJ has expanded staffing capacity to better meet the growing demand for legal services in Maine communities. However, if this funding is not renewed by the Legislature in 2025, MEJ will face staffing reductions, limiting our ability to provide critical services at a time when they are needed most.

MEJ must maintain and increase our capacity so that we can meet requests for assistance and advance solutions that address root causes of poverty and eliminate barriers that prevent economic mobility. By expanding resources and eliminating barriers to economic mobility, we can create lasting change and ensure every Mainer has access to the opportunities and support they deserve.

CONCLUSION

Maine Equal Justice relies on the critical support provided by the MCLSF to deliver individual advocacy and systemic solutions for Maine people with low income. Without this funding, the scope and impact of MEJ's legal services would be significantly reduced, leaving many without the assistance they need. On behalf of our Board, staff, and the individuals and families we serve, we extend our heartfelt gratitude for enabling this essential work and empowering us to create meaningful change in peoples' lives.

Respectfully submitted:



Robyn Merrill
Executive Director

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Report to the Maine Civil Legal Services Commission January 2025

On behalf of the Board of Directors and staff of Pine Tree Legal Assistance, I would like to thank the Commission for their continued support of equal access to civil justice in Maine. We are pleased to submit this report on Pine Tree’s work supported by the Fund in 2024.

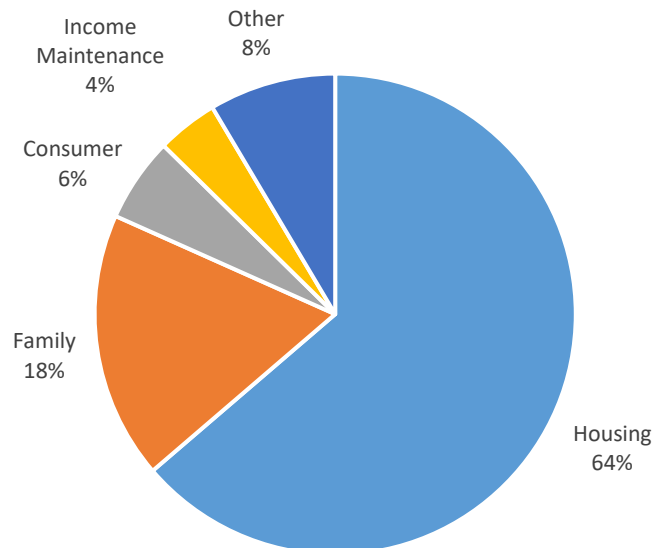
Types of cases handled

In 2024, Pine Tree Legal Assistance worked on a total of 7,372 cases. MCLSF provided partial funding support for all cases, augmenting and leveraging funding from other sources in a very important way that has ensured greater access to justice for thousands of Mainers.

Almost 65 percent of Pine Tree cases involved housing issues, including preventing evictions and foreclosures, enforcing safe housing and anti-discrimination laws, and others. Our housing advocacy addressed issues arising in homeownership, federally subsidized housing, public housing, private rental housing, and mobile homes.

Eighteen percent of Pine Tree cases involved family law, primarily working with survivors of domestic and sexual abuse and the non-offending caregivers of child sex abuse victims.

Additionally, six percent of Pine Tree cases involved consumer protections, such as access to utilities, automobile issues, and debt; four percent of Pine Tree cases involved income maintenance, including helping people access benefits, such as General Assistance; and other cases handled involved education, employment, tribal, health, juvenile, and other issues. The following chart shows the number of cases handled in 2024 by area of law.



Law Category	Cases Handled
Consumer	418
Education	265
Employment (including tax)	161
Family Law (including PFAs)	1325
Juvenile	20

Health	42
Housing	4,697
Income	303
Individual Rights	26
Miscellaneous (including Tribal law)	115
Total	7,372

Number of people served

Pine Tree’s services reached more than **one million people** in 2024 through our direct legal services, outreach, and websites.

- Pine Tree served 17,654 people through individual cases, including 6,456 children.
- Pine Tree served 8,664 people through community education activities including consultations, meetings, presentations, and trainings.
- Pine Tree’s websites were utilized by 833,369 unique users in 2024, accessing Pine Tree’s websites for a total of 1,552,303 page views.

MCLSF funding is crucial for the maintenance and development of website resources and self-help tools. Pine Tree maintains three websites: ptla.org, kidslegal.org, and statesidelegal.org. All three websites are freely available to any individual and remain an important way of increasing access to the justice system, especially for unrepresented individuals. Pine Tree’s websites are nationally recognized for their accessibility and successful provision of tools for unrepresented people to navigate the legal system when they need to do so. In 2024, ptla.org alone recorded 515,687 users and 980,078 page views. The following table highlights the most frequently viewed pages on ptla.org.

Rank	Page	2024 Pageviews
1	ptla.org homepage	87,934
2	Rights of Maine Renters: Eviction (Spanish language version)	74,217
3	Contact Us	61,538
4	Rights of Maine Renters: Security Deposits (Spanish language version)	32,256
5	FAQ about rental deposit (Spanish language version)	31,318
6	What is a Guardian ad Litem?	25,697
7	Tenant’s Rights: Poor Housing Conditions	23,681
8	How to Handle Social Security Overpayments	19,391
9	Rights of Maine Renters: Unsafe or Unfit Housing	15,830
10	Self- Help: Rental Housing Resources	15,465

Demographic information about people served

Pine Tree’s clients in 2024 are representative of the broad demographic diversity seen throughout the state:

- Two out of three are women and one percent identify as nonbinary, genderqueer, or a different gender than man or woman.

- Two out of five have a disability and more than half have someone in the household with a disability.
- One in six is aged 60 or older.
- One in seven is Black, Indigenous, or another person of color.
- One in twelve households include a veteran or current member of the military.

To make the most of its limited resources, Pine Tree prioritizes services to individuals and families with a household annual adjusted gross income that is at or below 125% of the federal poverty guidelines, which were, for reference, \$25,550 for a household of two in 2024. The chart below shows the breakdown of households served in 2024 by poverty level.

Below 100% poverty	50%
100% – 199% poverty	34%
Over 200% poverty	16%

Geographic area actually served

Pine Tree provides legal services to low-income residents in all sixteen counties. Our six neighborhood offices are strategically located around the state to be close to Maine courts. Our statewide phone intake system provides further access for all Mainers. We conduct outreach at several community locations, such as public libraries and town offices, and accept walk-in intake inquiries from prospective clients at our office locations. Pine Tree also participates in several referral partnerships to receive client referrals directly from other service providers.

The chart below shows the geographical distribution of Pine Tree’s cases and clients in 2024.

County	Cases Handled	All People Served
Androscoggin	864	2147
Aroostook	371	870
Cumberland	1,599	3,473
Franklin	123	335
Hancock	195	442
Kennebec	782	1906
Knox	132	329
Lincoln	93	221
Oxford	324	901
Penobscot	1,037	2,448
Piscataquis	84	250
Sagadahoc	157	378
Somerset	298	769
Waldo	169	422
Washington	158	384
York	918	2,173

Out of State	65	197
Unknown	3	9
Total	7,372	17,654

Status of matters handled, including whether they are complete or open

In 2024, Pine Tree staff and volunteers worked on 7,372 cases for individuals and families. Pine Tree’s advocacy ranged from the provision of legal information, advice, and brief service to negotiations and full legal representation in court and administrative hearings and in litigation. Pine Tree continues to prioritize providing full legal representation to our clients when possible. Of the 6,173 cases closed in 2024, clients in **37%** (2,716 cases) received legal representation in a court or administrative hearing. Of cases receiving representation, **96% were resolved in favor** of the Pine Tree client, highlighting the impact of legal services in ensuring that legal rights are properly investigated and heard in the appropriate tribunal. The following chart shows the status of matters handled in 2024.

Status	# of Cases	%
Resolved in favor of the client after full legal representation	2,599	35%
Resolved in favor of the opposing party after full legal representation	117	2%
Resolved after Pine Tree provided information, advice, or limited assistance	3,457	47%
Cases still open as of 12/31/2024	1,199	16%
Total cases worked on in 2024	7,373	

Whether and to what extent the organization has complied with its proposal to the Commission

The activities supported with MCLSF funding in 2024 are consistent with the activities proposed in Pine Tree’s 2024-25 application to the Commission. In the application, Pine Tree sought funding to support its three key strategies:

- direct civil legal advocacy for individuals and families who are unable to afford private counsel.
- maintenance and development of program website resources and self-help and other community-facing educational tools.
- training events and presentations to client groups, social service providers, members of the private bar, and others.

Outcome measurements used to determine compliance

Using case management software, Pine Tree tracks both the number of cases opened and closed within a given period and the extent to which the client's objectives were achieved. Specific case closing codes are used to track the results of closed cases and to distinguish between successful and unsuccessful outcomes. Additionally, Pine Tree records data on more than 50 potential case outcomes. With Pine Tree’s unique emphasis on full legal representation throughout Maine, the outcomes of our 2024 advocacy are extensive.

The following data highlights some of Pine Tree's most significant outcomes. In 2024, Pine Tree's advocacy:

- Resulted in \$3,733,036 in income, savings, and benefits to our clients.
- Prevented homelessness for 1,798 households by preventing or delaying an eviction.
- Preserved housing subsidies for eligible tenant families worth more than \$250,000 annually.
- Secured more than 360 new or extended protection orders for victims of domestic violence, sexual assault, stalking, and dating violence.

The data collected on outcomes provides only a glimpse into the impact of Pine Tree's advocacy. The impact of direct legal services can be profound. The following examples help further illustrate how funding from the Maine Civil Legal Services Fund is used to stabilize the lives of Mainers with low incomes.

This year, among several significant cases, Pine Tree reached a settlement in our groundbreaking lawsuit against 2U Inc. and Climb. This lawsuit sought to enforce consumer protections related to abuses by predatory student loan lenders and for-profit online program managers. ([The Consumer Financial Protection Bureau recently filed its own big case against Climb.](#)) Pine Tree is the only organization providing legal assistance in Maine to help student loan borrowers navigate the programs and protect and enforce their rights.

In another case, Pine Tree helped a 70-year-old man who had been living in his apartment for decades and was suddenly facing homelessness. His rent was very low, because he worked for the landlord as a maintenance person. After the pandemic hit, the client wanted to slow down his work because of his age and health challenges. The landlord moved to evict our client, arguing he could make more on a private tenancy. As a result of our advocacy, rather than facing homelessness mid-pandemic, the client was instead able to remain in his home for two years while he waited on subsidized housing lists. When his unit became available, he moved, and the eviction case was dismissed. The client now has long-term affordable housing again.

In another case, Pine Tree was contacted by a previous client who had just moved into a new apartment but was unable to get electricity. The utility company refused to turn on the electricity until a balance owed by the previous tenants was paid. The previous tenants had owed over \$1,000. Our client was nervous that she would not have electricity and heat before an upcoming winter storm. A Pine Tree attorney reached out to the utility company on the client's behalf to explain the situation. They agreed to provide electricity at the typical customer rate!

Information regarding unmet and underserved needs

Pine Tree Legal Assistance is Maine's oldest and largest legal aid provider, providing legal representation throughout the State in a wide variety of legal proceedings. As a result of being in operation since 1967, it is a widely recognized resource for people with civil legal needs. However, as a result of serious and growing funding limitations, Pine Tree does not have sufficient staff to accept every meritorious case for which help is sought.

In 2024, Pine Tree Legal Assistance recorded 9,304 requests for legal help. Just under 70% of the requests for assistance resulted in a new case. The remaining 36% were addressed with general legal information and/or referrals to other resources but could not be opened as Pine Tree cases because of insufficient staffing or conflicts. Of the requests that Pine Tree Legal Assistance was able to open as cases, we provided clients with the level of service they requested in 71% of cases. Because of our limited staff capacity, a lesser degree of assistance (such as advice rather than full representation) than clients requested was provided in the remaining 29% of cases.

This data documents only a fraction of the actual unmet and underserved civil legal needs in Maine, since it only includes requests received by staff. Despite our outreach efforts, many Mainers remain unaware of legal aid programs or even that their problem is one for which legal services would be appropriate. A national study has shown that most people with civil legal problems do not identify them in that way and do nothing in response, enabling bad actors to continue operating outside the legal system.


Conclusion

A hallmark of Pine Tree's legacy over the past 58+ years is our innovation - creating new and innovative ways to expand access to justice. Pine Tree continued this legacy in 2024 with the launch of a new rural justice fellowship to increase services Downeast and in Aroostook County. We hope the injection of resources, energy and prestige helps augment our services in our two most rural offices' areas for years to come. This new initiative is made possible, in large part, due to funding from the Maine Civil Legal Services Fund.

Despite our successes, Pine Tree, and the people we serve, continue to face serious challenges. Our clients continue to struggle with an affordable housing crisis and economic uncertainty. Pine Tree is facing financial uncertainty, as many of our funding sources are at risk of decreasing or being eliminated altogether.

Thanks to the funding provided through the Maine Civil Legal Services Fund and other sources, our team continues to strive to meet the needs of our clients all over Maine. Every Pine Tree office – from Presque Isle to Portland – was supported with MCLSF funding in the past year. That funding also assured Pine Tree's presence online, allowing individuals all over the state to access information about legal rights and responsibilities. MCLSF funding will remain very important to our work in 2025. We are very grateful to the Maine Legislature and State leadership for their continuing support of the Maine Civil Legal Services Fund.

Respectfully submitted,



Tom Fritzsche
Executive Director

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Clinics at
Maine Law

**2024 ANNUAL REPORT
TO THE MAINE CIVIL LEGAL SERVICES FUND COMMISSION
AND THE JOINT STANDING COMMITTEE ON THE JUDICIARY**

The Clinics at Maine Law at the University of Maine School of Law (“the Clinics”) is pleased to submit this report on its use of the funds it received in 2024 from the Maine Civil Legal Services Fund (“the Fund” or “MCLSF”).

A. OVERVIEW OF THE CLINICS PROGRAMS AND ACTIVITIES

Established in 1970 and now celebrating its 55th year, the Clinics at Maine Law (formerly known as the Cumberland Legal Aid Clinic) is a program of the University of Maine School of Law (Maine Law) in which second and third-year law students, specially licensed to practice under court and agency rules as “student attorneys,” provide free legal services to low-income individuals in Maine. The recent name change reflects the expansive reach of the Clinics. Student attorneys at the Clinics work under the close supervision of Clinic faculty, who are experienced practitioners and members of the Maine Bar. The Clinics’ mission is to train the next generation of lawyers by promoting access to justice while meeting the acute needs of vulnerable communities. At a time when Maine faces a growing need for lawyers, the Clinics continue to work to address this challenge. In 2024, clinic students provided over 17,000 hours of pro bono legal services to low-income Mainers.

As the only legal aid provider in Maine focused on both serving the community and training the next generation of lawyers, our impact extends far beyond immediate client needs. The magnitude of the impact of the Clinics is demonstrated not only in the number of clients and cases that we report, but in the number of law students that are graduating law school with essential training in core lawyering skills and an understanding of the importance of access to justice for all. Through the multiplier effect, our student attorneys not only make a difference for clients today, but also carry the skills and experience they gain in the Clinics into their future legal careers, amplifying their impact over time.

Over half of Maine Law’s graduates spend at least one semester doing clinical work, and, once Clinic alumni become members of the Maine Bar, a significant number of them go on to work at legal aid organizations, get rostered to accept court-appointed cases, or volunteer to represent low-income Maine residents pro bono or at reduced rates.

The Clinics serve clients with a range of legal matters pending in state, probate, and federal courts and agencies throughout Maine. Services are provided through seven distinct clinical programs, five of which receive some of their support through the Fund: (1) General Practice; (2) Prisoner Assistance; (3) Youth Justice; (4) Refugee and Human Rights; (5) Protection from Abuse; (6) Rural Practice (supported by other funding); and (7) Center for Youth Policy and Law (supported by other funding). The Rural Practice Clinic is funded by a grant from the Office of the Maine Attorney and the Center for Youth Policy and Law is supported by external funding as well. Eligibility requirements for clients are specific to each program, but all serve indigent clients almost exclusively. Most individuals qualify for the Clinics' services when (a) their household gross income falls within our financial guidelines, (b) the court or agency is within our geographic service area, and (c) we have openings for new clients.

Initial screening of clients to determine eligibility is conducted by the Clinics' staff. Student attorneys complete the intake process, and cases are accepted only after faculty approval. Due to limited resources, the Clinics cannot accept every case that meets our eligibility requirements. Other considerations given priority in accepting a case are (a) the acuteness of a client's need, (b) the availability of alternative sources of legal services or assistance, (c) the Clinics ability to provide quality representation, (d) the amount of financial and other resources required to represent the client in the matter, and (e) the educational value of the case.

The Clinics are run by six full-time faculty, three part-time faculty, two teaching fellows, two full-time staff, and one part-time staff. A total of 66 law students participated in the Clinics in 2024. Fifty-five students enrolled in clinical courses during the spring and fall semesters in 2024. In addition, all students participating in the Clinics during the academic year are required to enroll in a separate Lawyering Skills for Clinical Practice course, which provides an in-depth classroom learning experience focusing on core lawyering skills including client-centered lawyering, interviewing, counseling, trauma-informed lawyering, cultural humility, case theory, and negotiation, among others. During the summer, the Clinics hired seven law students in the Portland office and two students in our Fort Kent office as full-time interns, and three students as part-time fellows working on policy and outreach projects. As a result, the Clinics were able to provide much-needed representation to individuals on a year-round basis.

The **General Practice Clinic** provides full representation to low-income Mainers in a broad range of litigation-related matters at administrative, trial, and appellate levels. The majority of cases involve family law and domestic matters, but student attorneys also work on state and federal cases involving consumer, criminal, juvenile, housing, probate, administrative, and miscellaneous civil issues. Priority for representation by the General Practice Clinic is given to (a) clients with whom we have worked in the Protection from Abuse Project and other limited-representation programs of the Clinics, (b) referrals from other legal aid providers who are unable to provide assistance, and (c) referrals from area courts and agencies who have

identified litigants as having a particularly acute need for quality legal representation in their legal matters. The General Practice Clinic provided representation to 61 clients in 2024.

The **Prisoner Assistance Clinic** provides civil legal services to individuals incarcerated in the Maine prison system. This program emphasizes the development of interviewing and counseling skills by delivering “unbundled” legal services (*i.e.*, limited representation) on a wide range of issues. To meet with clients with civil legal matters, students in the program visit the Maine Correctional Center and the Southern Maine Women’s Re-Entry Center in Windham every week. The Prisoner Assistance Clinic also serves clients in other correctional facilities through written correspondence, video conferencing, and telephone calls. In 2024, this Clinic provided incarcerated individuals with legal information, advice, and, in some cases, full representation in 87 civil legal matters.

The **Youth Justice Clinic** provides representation to youth in several different contexts. Student attorneys hone their advocacy skills on behalf of youth in courts, schools, and other agencies that impact and work with children. As well as representing children with matters pending in the Maine Juvenile Courts, they provide information and advice on a wide range of legal matters to homeless teens and young adults through direct referrals from Preble Street Teen Center and other community-based organizations providing services to our clients. Law students in the Youth Justice Clinic also work with the **Center for Youth Policy & Law** to benefit Maine children and youth statewide through policy projects that have included juvenile record sealing, alternatives to incarceration, and cross-system collaboration to support youth transitioning out of the justice system.

The **Refugee and Human Rights Clinic (RHRC)** provides an opportunity for students to represent low-income immigrants in a broad range of cases and projects. Those served include (a) asylum applicants who have fled human rights abuses in their home countries and are seeking refuge in the United States, (b) immigrant survivors of domestic violence, (c) immigrant victims of certain crimes, and (d) abandoned, neglected or abused children seeking legal status in the United States. In collaboration with a number of community partners both locally, regionally, nationally and internationally, RHRC students also engage in a number of impact and outreach projects. In 2024, RHRC students provided full representation to clients in 44 legal matters and assisted over 600 immigrants, recent immigrants and refugees through public education and outreach work. The RHRC also reached over 250 community members and professionals who work with asylum seekers, including, *e.g.*, teachers, housing coordinators, and medical professionals. Among these public education and outreach initiatives were training sessions in area hotels, schools, and community centers to Maine’s immigrant populations on how to apply for asylum and on a range of other topics involving immigration law and policy. The Fund provides critical resources for a part-time faculty position whose responsibilities primarily

include increasing outreach and advocacy for RHRC, which has greatly increased the number of individuals served through outreach by this Clinic.

Maine Law students enrolled in each of the above Clinics or hired as summer interns participate in the **Protection from Abuse Project** (PFA Project). This project receives top marks from students, courts, and clients alike. Student attorneys attend the weekly Protection from Abuse docket call each week in the Lewiston District Court and represent victim-survivors of domestic or dating violence, sexual abuse, or stalking who need representation. In 2024, the Fund supported a majority of the PFA Project as the U.S. Department of Justice grant previously supporting the PFA Project ended in the fall of 2023. As a direct result of the Fund's support, in 2024 the program provided representation to victim-survivors in 215 cases.

We opened our **Rural Practice Clinic** (RPC) in Fort Kent in 2023. This project is currently fully funded by a grant from the Office of the Maine Attorney General. Supervising Professor (and former District Court Judge) David Soucy and Teaching Fellow Ryan Fowler stepped down from their positions during the summer of 2024. Clinical faculty made many trips to Fort Kent to provide supervising support before Professor Christopher Northrop took over as the RPC's Supervising Professor this fall. Due to this transition, the RPC moved to a different model for the fall semester. Seven Portland-based students were assigned RPC clients; those students rotated in and out of Fort Kent throughout the semester. Starting this spring, the RPC will shift back to the original model – two student attorneys living and working in Fort Kent on a full-time basis supervised by our onsite professor. There is already a full roster of students prepared to live and work at the RPC for all of 2025. In addition to his clinical duties Professor Northrop, will also engage in teaching law-related undergraduate classes in order to strengthen our partnership with UMFK. Given that the essence of much small town and rural practice is working with a wide range of legal issues, RPC takes a very broad view of potential clients and case types. Our student attorneys have handled criminal defense, debt collection defense, a variety of family law issues, delinquency defense, advised on estate questions, and represented victims in Protection from Abuse proceedings. Since its inception in 2023, the RPC has represented 113 individuals in 126 legal matters. Since the RPC is not funded by MCLSF, the cases are not reported below although it should be noted that much of the RPC caseload is civil matters as well. For additional information on the RPC, please refer to the recently released [*Report on the Success of Maine Law's Rural Practice Clinic*](#).

B. SPECIFIC INFORMATION REQUESTED BY THE FUND COMMISSION

The Maine Civil Legal Services Fund is a critical source of external funding for the Clinics. In 2024, the Fund covered over 18% of the total costs of running the Clinics. While the Clinic relies on money received from the Fund for nearly all the programs described above, it depends on that funding especially for the Prisoner Assistance Clinic, the Protection from Abuse Project, the

General Practice Clinic, the part-time outreach and advocacy attorney in the RHRC, and the Summer Intern Program.

In 2024, resources provided by the Fund enabled the Clinics to support our ongoing civil legal advocacy by partially funding one full-time supervising faculty, two adjunct faculty members, an administrative coordinator for the Prisoner Assistance Clinic, and three of the seven Portland-based summer interns whose coverage of ongoing cases made it possible for us to operate throughout the year. MCLSF funds also enabled us to purchase training and research materials for our clinic library and to cover expenses directly related to providing legal services, such as travel to court, hiring interpreters and translators, printing, telephone, and mail. Through its funding of the Clinics, the Fund has supported the training of a significant cohort of new lawyers in Maine and enabled hundreds of Maine's lower-income residents to have access to justice.

Additionally, the supplemental funding provided by MCLSF in 2024 enabled the Clinics to hire one full-time teaching fellow to supervise additional students and expand our outreach efforts exclusively in civil legal matters and fully sustain the Protection from Abuse Project.

1. The types of cases handled by the organization as a result of money received from the Fund

The majority of cases handled by the Clinics are civil legal matters and are supported substantially by the Fund. In 2024, the Clinics handled 414 civil legal cases supported by the Fund which is a 16% increase over the previous year. As discussed below, this increase correlates to the hiring of our Civil Advocacy Teaching Fellow funded entirely by MCLSF, which increased capacity and enabled the Clinics to reach more clients through direct representation and outreach.

In 2024, student attorneys argued against the termination of parental rights in child protective cases and filed motions challenging the sufficiency of a de facto parentage claim. They represented debtors in small claims court and advocated for tenants facing warranty of habitability issues and illegal eviction proceedings.

Students in the General Practice Clinic also began providing pro bono assistance to the Volunteer Lawyers Project in 2024 by providing limited representation and counseling to clients with pending family court matters. This experience allows students to improve their understanding of family law and to practice client counseling - in one of the greatest areas of unmet legal need in Maine. We are excited to grow this collaboration in future semesters.

Family law matters funded by MCLSF, including Protection from Abuse cases, comprised approximately 76% of the Clinics' civil caseload, or 315 cases. Family law cases including parental rights and responsibilities, child protection, de facto parentage, child support, divorce,

and minor guardianship, totaled 100 cases in 2024. In addition, the Clinics handled 215 Protection from Abuse through the Protection from Abuse Project in Lewiston.

In 2024, in addition to family matters and protection from abuse cases, the Clinics handled 99 other civil legal cases. Other areas of civil legal services handled in the General Practice Clinic and Prisoner Assistance Clinic in 2024 include special immigrant juvenile predicate orders, small claims, employment, taxes, education, homeless student issue, public benefits, housing, bankruptcy, small claims, landlord tenant issues, trusts and wills, adult guardianship, and powers of attorney.

In the Refugee and Human Rights Clinic, student attorneys assisted clients with matters involving defensive asylum (asylum claims asserted as a defense to deportation in civil immigration court proceedings), work permits, Freedom of Information Act requests, asylum derivatives/family reunification, lawful permanent residence, special immigrant juvenile status, and naturalization. Student attorneys also provided limited representation assistance to pro se asylum seekers in Portland to help them correctly fill out and file their asylum applications (the Form I-589) either in immigration court or with United States Citizenship and Immigration Services, depending upon each individual’s circumstances.

As stated previously, one priority of the Clinics is to train law students to meet the ever-evolving legal needs in Maine upon graduation. The need for attorneys to handle court appointed cases is at a critical level. Over the past couple of years, the Clinics have prioritized referrals in Child Protection cases. Although the number of clients we are able to represent in these matters is low, we are able to provide extensive training to students who then go on to accept these types of cases as licensed attorneys. In 2024, with support of the Fund, student attorneys spent approximately 1,000 hours providing legal assistance and representation to parents in child protection cases.

Number of Civil Cases Supported by the Fund

Case Type	2023	2024	Increase
Family Law	74	100	35%
Protection from Abuse	186	215	16%
Other Civil Matter (including Immigration)	98	99	even
Total	358	414	16%

2. *The number of people served by the organization as a result of money received from the Fund*

In 2024, with money received by the Fund, the Clinics provided civil legal assistance to a total of 359 individuals; for several of these clients, students provided assistance on multiple legal matters. The Clinics also assisted more than 650 additional individuals through various civil legal outreach and advocacy projects. As a result, the Clinics served 17% more clients in civil legal matters and reached 58% more people through outreach and advocacy projects over the previous year.

Number of Clients Served in Civil Matters Supported by the Fund

Clinical Program	2023	2024	Increase
General Practice	43	51	19%
Prisoner Assistance	67	78	16%
Refugee and Human Rights	33	39	18%
Protection from Abuse	163	191	17%
Total	306	359	17%

Number of Clients Reached by Outreach and Advocacy Projects Supported by the Fund

	2023	2024	Increase
Clients Reached	411	650	58%

3. *Demographic information about the people served as a result of money received from the Fund*

The primary demographic information tracked by the Clinics is the client’s county of residence. The county-by-county breakdown of our clients’ places of residence in 2024 for civil casework funded by MCLSF is as follows: Androscoggin 186; Cumberland 116; Kennebec 12; Knox 10; Oxford 9; Penobscot 5; Sagadahoc 2; Somerset 1; Washington 2; York County 12; Out of State 4. These numbers include clients in our Prisoner Assistance Clinic, who are incarcerated in several locations throughout the state. In some instances, the prisoners do not have an identifiable “home” county, in which case we list the county of their correctional facility. Although not funded by MCLSF, the Clinics also provided legal assistance to clients in Aroostook through the Rural Practice Clinic.

The Clinics assisted a large number of clients with Limited English Proficiency or who were born outside of the United States. During 2024, our clients' countries of origin included Angola, Afghanistan, Angola, Burundi, Colombia, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Ecuador, Finland, Gabon, Guatemala, Haiti, Honduras, Jamaica, Mexico, Sudan, Uganda, Ukraine, United States and Venezuela. The Clinic also assisted clients from Maine's tribes.

4. The geographical area served by the organization because of money received from the Fund

The Clinics serves clients with matters pending throughout Maine. The legal work is primarily performed by Portland-based law students who are also enrolled in other courses at the Law School. As a result, the Clinics' full representation cases supported by the Fund are predominantly handled in federal, state and probate courts and agencies located in Cumberland, York, Androscoggin, Kennebec, and Sagadahoc counties. We do, however, appear in courts in other parts of Maine as well. In 2024, we provided full representation to clients with cases in state and federal courts and agencies located in Augusta, Bangor, Biddeford, Caribou, Fort Kent, Lewiston, Madawaska, Sagadahoc, Skowhegan, Springvale, Waterville, West Bath, York, and Portland (including the Maine Supreme Judicial Court and the Federal District Court), as well as the Department of Justice Immigration Court in Boston and Chelmsford (which have jurisdiction of Maine's immigration cases). In addition, through the Prisoner Assistance Clinic, we served, on a more limited basis, clients with legal matters arising anywhere in the state, covering nearly every district court, many county probate courts, and some tribal courts.

5. The status of the matters handled, including whether they are complete or open

The Clinics handled 414 civil legal matters in 2024. The Clinic had 73 civil cases open at the start of 2024. During the year, the Clinic opened 334 new cases and closed 322. Currently, at the end of the year, the Clinic has 85 civil cases open. We were able to wrap up a number of cases in anticipation of the start of the new semester in January 2025 when we expect to take on new clients.

6. Whether and to what extent the recipient organization complied with the proposal submitted to the Commission at the time of the application for funds

The Clinics has complied in all key respects with the proposal submitted in September 2023. As indicated in the Overview provided in this report, the Clinic has maintained all the programs described in that proposal. Our central focus, providing high-quality full representation to low-income individuals while educating future attorneys, has remained unchanged.

The Clinics most recent application included proposed funding to hire a full time Civil Advocacy Teaching Fellow to support the civil legal work provided by our Clinics and in particular to support the Prisoner Assistance Clinic. Since its launch in 2003, the Prisoner Assistance Clinic

has provided a unique and essential service to people who are incarcerated in Maine: access to civil legal aid. While most of the state's other legal aid providers are limited in their ability to provide civil legal assistance within Maine's prisons and jails, student attorneys enrolled in Maine Law's Prisoner Assistance Clinic are able to meet a significant percentage of that need by providing people who are incarcerated with legal assistance and counsel. While serving time, individuals frequently end up needing legal help concerning their family, consumer, and other civil legal matters, some of which arise from the circumstances of their incarceration. When student attorneys work with clients who are incarcerated, they are not only helping those particular individuals but their work also has positive impacts on their clients' family members and communities. Without this funding, which makes the work of the student attorneys possible, these needs simply would not be met.

Thanks to the Governor and the Legislature, and as a direct result of the increase in the funds received from MCLSF in 2024, Jennifer Rizzuto was hired in March as the Civil Advocacy Teaching Fellow. One of her primary responsibilities is to increase outreach and legal information presentations to incarcerated individuals. Planning and preparation began in the spring and during the summer of 2024, students created a parental rights training. The training covered multiple ways that a parent's rights to their children could be impacted by incarceration, including parental rights and responsibilities, guardianship, power of attorney, child protection, and protection from abuse. The training was done in conjunction with a parenting class at the Women's Center at Maine Correctional Center (MCC) and the Southern Maine Women's Re-Entry Center. The training was incredibly well received by both staff and residents. After the training, students helped residents fill out intake forms, and have been able to assist many of these residents with their parental rights over the course of this past semester. The education department at MCC has asked students to give the presentation again in the coming spring semester, both to the next group of the women's parenting class, and to a new parenting class that they have developed for the male residents.

In addition to the parental rights outreach training, students have also developed a training on the Good Samaritan Law, which they gave to residents in December 2024 and January 2025. These presentations were held at the Men's Center, the Women's Center, and the Southern Maine Women's Re-Entry Center. Residents were very engaged in the presentations, asking numerous questions and participating in the scenarios the Student Attorneys proposed. These presentations generated significant interest in the work that the Prisoner Assistance Clinic does, and a number of residents requested our help with their civil legal needs. MCC has asked us to come back and do these training sessions again during National Recovery Month.

In 2024, with the addition of the teaching fellow, the Prisoner Assistance Clinic served over 100 residents of Maine correctional facilities through direct representation and outreach, surpassing the goal set forth in the proposal. The number of civil cases handled by the Clinics increased by

16% and 54% more people were reached through outreach and advocacy projects in 2024 over the prior year.

In 2025, with support from the Fund, one of the goals of the Prisoner Assistance Clinic is to grow our outreach efforts in Maine prisons and expand the outreach programs to the local jails. By meeting with residents earlier in their incarceration, outreach could help clients make decisions about a wide range of family matters from guardianship to child support in addition to other civil legal matters, such as housing and benefits, that would make their eventual transition back into the community more seamless and successful. Individuals who resolve their civil legal issues while incarcerated are better prepared to reintegrate into society, reducing the likelihood of reoffending. This contributes to safer communities and lowers the burden on the criminal justice system.

7. *Outcomes measurements used to determine compliance*

The Clinics track data regarding its cases through the same case management system (Legal Server) used by many other legal services providers. This software enables us to review the type and volume of cases handled each year. Caseload volume usually depends on the complexity of the individual cases being handled as well as student enrollment. The latter can depend in turn on the number of Clinic faculty supervisors available, the degree of student interest, and overall enrollment in Maine Law. Faculty supervisor approval is required for every case acceptance, ensuring that the case falls within the Clinic's relevant parameters, which include measurements set to ensure compliance with our 2023 proposal to the Commission.

The Clinics employ specific evaluation mechanisms to ensure both the high quality of the representation we provide to our clients and the benefit that students receive from their experience working in the Clinics. Faculty supervisors accompany students to every court appearance. All incoming mail and every phone message is routed to the student's faculty supervisor, and no written communication (*e.g.*, letter, e-mail, or court filing) can be printed, faxed, or mailed without the supervisor's approval. Since the students are participating in an academic program for which they receive a final grade, every aspect of their work is subject to university evaluation as well as supervision by faculty.

As an educational program, each clinical program is subject to ongoing evaluations conducted by the University, including extensive evaluations of members of our faculty. In addition, faculty regularly contact judges, clerks, and social service providers who work with our program to solicit their feedback. All clients served receive a questionnaire when their case is closed, and completed questionnaires are reviewed by the relevant student attorneys, faculty supervisors, and the Clinics' Co-Directors. While response rates to these exit questionnaires vary, those clients who do respond nearly always give warm praise to the work performed by students and express deep appreciation for the assistance they received from the Clinics. Also, all students enrolled in

clinic courses are asked to complete detailed evaluations of their clinic program and of their experiences working there.

An important measure of the success of the Clinics is our students' career choices after they graduate. Recent Maine Law graduates who participated in clinical programs have taken positions with Catholic Charities, Disability Rights Maine, the Maine Legislature, the American Civil Liberties Union of Maine, Legal Services for Maine Elders, Pine Tree Legal Assistance, the Immigrant Legal Advocacy Project, county prosecutors' offices, public defenders' offices, the Office of the Attorney General, as well as positions in the state and federal courts as clerks and fellows. Other recent Maine Law graduates associated with the Clinics have joined or opened small firm practices in rural Maine, including counties with underserved populations. A number of our graduates tell us that, as a result of their experiences working in the Clinics, they have decided to become rostered guardians *ad litem* or to accept court appointments in the areas of child protection, juvenile defense, or criminal defense. Several graduates of the Clinics have signed on with the Maine Volunteer Lawyers Project and the Immigrant Legal Advocacy Project to accept pro bono cases.

8. *Information regarding unmet and underserved needs.*

The Clinics receive hundreds of calls from individuals seeking legal assistance every year and also receive many referrals from courts and agencies. In 2024, 1798 individuals contacted the Clinics for legal assistance and were provided referrals to other agencies due to their ineligibility for our assistance or a lack of available openings at the Clinics. The Clinics front desk is staffed exclusively by law student volunteers and work study law students. The phone line is staffed during business hours and the Clinics is the only legal aid organization in Maine with unrestricted intake hours that provides live, personalized referral services to every individual that calls for assistance.

Since the number of low-income Maine residents who need our help greatly exceeds our program's capacity, the Clinics designates certain priorities for case acceptance. Thus, in assessing eligibility, we give priority to those potential clients who would otherwise have particular difficulty representing themselves due, for example, to language barriers, immigration status, mental illness or other disability, a history of domestic violence, youth, sexual orientation, or geographic isolation. We also provide legal representation in those areas of the law where there is a particularly acute need, such as complex family law matters with issues of family violence, substance abuse, mental illness, or conflicting jurisdiction. The Clinics makes every effort to accommodate referrals from courts and other organizations that have identified specific individuals who would benefit from our assistance, particularly where this is due to the limitations of other legal aid programs. Because a number of our programs provide a broad range of assistance to many people, for example, through the Protection from Abuse Program and through the Prisoner Assistance Clinic, we are able to identify individuals with a particular need

for extensive legal assistance, thus ensuring that our resources are allocated to those for whom the need for such assistance is most acute.

C. CONCLUSION

The MCLSF funding continues to be a critical resource for the Clinics. The Clinics rely heavily on external sources of funding to continue its work. Still, given the extensive needs, the combination of State funding for the University of Maine System, other grants, and philanthropic donations are insufficient to cover all needs. The Fund is an especially valuable source of support that enables the Clinics not only to train new lawyers and to continue its legal aid work at current levels but to explore and develop ways to pursue that mission even more effectively and extensively.

In 2024, the Fund provided financial resources essential to sustaining the Clinics' dual mission of providing much-needed legal services to chronically-underserved populations in Maine while educating the next generation of attorneys. Additionally, the supplemental money received from the Fund in 2024 enabled us to increase our services to clients through representation and outreach projects. The correlation between the additional resources provided by the Fund in 2024 and impact on the community is measurable and significant.

The Dean, faculty, staff, and students of the Clinics at Maine Law join us in expressing our appreciation of the Maine Civil Legal Services Fund for its continued support of our programs. We would be happy to answer any questions or supply any additional information that is requested.

Respectfully submitted,



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Maine Volunteer Lawyers Project Report to the Maine Civil Legal Services Fund Commission January - December 2024

A. Overview of Applicant Organization

The Maine Volunteer Lawyers Project (VLP) was formed in 1983 as a joint project of the Maine Justice Foundation (MJF) and Pine Tree Legal Assistance (PTLA). In 2017, the VLP became a separate, non-profit organization.

The Mission of the VLP is to connect dedicated volunteer attorneys with individuals needing legal assistance with civil matters, ensuring equal access to justice statewide. We serve as a nexus between lawyers who want to fulfill their professional responsibility to provide pro bono service and the people who need those services. Our goals include increasing awareness of the civil legal needs of people with low incomes, highlighting the importance of pro bono service in filling the gaps in legal aid, connecting low-income clients who have civil legal issues with volunteer lawyers, developing pro bono opportunities for lawyers and non-lawyer volunteers, and helping lawyers find ways to volunteer that align with their interests and availability to fulfill their professional responsibility to provide pro bono service.

We work towards these goals with a small staff of nine (four full-time, five part-time) who provide administrative support to the volunteer efforts of the Maine legal community. The VLP also provides training, supervision, and support for student and community volunteers who assist with VLP intake and pro bono projects. We invite attorneys to join our volunteers through our website and with direct recruitment. We connect with newly admitted lawyers to engage them in pro bono service as a routine part of their legal practice and partner with community service agencies to make services as effective and accessible as possible. We connect with the courts and community organizations to increase awareness of VLP's services. We advocate for changes to court rules and other procedures to reduce barriers to volunteer service. We partner with the other legal aid providers, the Maine State Bar Association, the Maine Justice Foundation, the Maine Justice Action Group, and community organizations to increase available pro bono legal assistance. These activities all support our work of delivering legal services to low-income Mainers who need them.

The VLP provides services statewide with offices in Portland and Bangor. VLP volunteer attorneys provide more than 2,000 hours of free legal help every year to clients in all sixteen Maine counties. Our clients faced a wide range of civil legal problems including family law, protection from abuse, workers' rights, probate, small claims, property, bankruptcy, and unemployment and disability benefits appeals. VLP volunteer attorneys help people in courthouses, online, and through our many virtual clinics to ensure that our services are accessible to those who need them.

The VLP staff handles client intake and financial screening. To be eligible for VLP services, clients must have a civil legal issue in Maine and have an income of 200% or less of the annual federal poverty guidelines or have exceptional needs or circumstances that are determined on a case-by-case basis. We determine what kind of help the client needs and how best we can

provide it. Then we assign them to the appropriate program and try to connect them with a volunteer attorney. Our staff also gathers documents and other information to assist attorneys in their work with clients. We support our attorney volunteers by helping each one find the form of pro bono service that best fits their goals and availability. We also provide free CLEs and training, mentoring, and malpractice insurance for volunteers' work on VLP cases.

B. Information Requested by the Commission

Types of Cases Handled

The VLP coordinates legal services provided by volunteer attorneys generally in three ways: attorney referral, limited representation clinics, and online legal advice.

“Attorney referral” means that VLP has recruited an attorney to accept a client for consultation with the possibility of providing full, pro bono representation in their legal matter, and the lawyer will provide the same service that would be provided to a paying client. In 2024, VLP referred clients for pro bono assistance in a range of civil matters including: bankruptcy, benefits appeals and overpayments, family law, employment, end-of-life issues including wills and probate matters, and real estate. VLP recruits attorneys to do outreach to members of the bar regarding specific cases through our “Lawyer to Lawyer” referral program.

Given the high volume of requests for some case types or due to certain populations with specific needs, VLP developed several programs referred to as “clinics,” where qualified individuals meet with an attorney for limited representation and advice. Clients can have multiple clinic appointments if needed. During 2024, VLP’s clinic programs included virtual and in-person Courthouse Assistance Programs (CHAPs) for family law; Helpline, for family law with domestic violence concerns; Workers Rights Legal Clinic, for employment-related concerns; Small Claims Clinic, to assist people with small claims matters; Maine Homeless Legal Project, to assist clients referred by Preble Street; and Bankruptcy Clinic, to assist people who have significant debt. Those consultations occasionally lead to extended representation.

VLP organizes and manages volunteer attorneys to provide limited representation in Protection from Abuse (PFA) matters through our Portland Domestic Violence Pro Bono Panel and Lewiston Protection from Abuse Panel, in partnership and coordination with domestic violence resource centers around the state. The volunteer attorneys in these programs provide consultations and in-person representation for protection from abuse cases in Portland and Lewiston, which may include representation through the conclusion of the PFA matter.¹ Volunteer attorneys provide consultations and occasional in-court representation to survivors of domestic violence in other parts of Maine.

Finally, VLP manages the Free Legal Answers Maine website, a partnership with the American Bar Association, where qualified Mainers can go online and ask questions about civil legal matters, and attorneys recruited and supported by VLP provide answers. VLP staff serve as site

¹ We launched a new in-person PFA Panel in York County in January 2025.

administrators, including screening and monitoring the questions and providing referrals to other resources where appropriate.

VLP has developed partnerships with a variety of community organizations to facilitate referrals of their clients to VLP for help with civil legal matters. In addition to Maine's domestic violence resource centers (DVRCs) and Preble Street, VLP's community partners include Acadia Hospital, Wabanaki Health and Wellness, Groups Recover Together, Adoptive and Foster Families of Maine, Peer Workforce Navigator Project, and Maine Access Immigrant Network. Maine's other civil legal aid programs also regularly refer clients to VLP.

Number of People Served

In 2024, 2,280 people received legal assistance in one of the above-mentioned ways through VLP. 1,869 individuals had open cases with VLP during 2024; of those, 1,408 were new cases opened during the year. The services provided ranged from referrals for pro bono full representation to limited representation to providing advice and guidance about a civil legal matter. The level of service is determined at the time the case is closed. For matters closed during 2024, 1,481 individuals received limited representation or legal information services. Seventy-eight people received extended representation. 305 cases remained open as of January 1, 2025, so the level of service had not yet been determined.

In addition, in 2024, VLP's volunteer attorneys answered 347 questions asked by 411 individuals through the Free Legal Answers Maine (FLAME) online portal, for a total of 2,280 people served.

These numbers do not reflect the total number of people who contact VLP for help. Those we cannot serve are provided information about other resources available to resolve their issues, including referrals to other legal aid providers and other community services when they are not eligible for our services. VLP uses a tracking system to collect the data to document the extent of this additional service. In 2024, nearly 1,800 people received resource referrals from VLP.

As of December 31, 2024, VLP had 305 cases open. Of those, 68 were referred to a volunteer attorney, and 20 were waiting for a volunteer attorney to accept their case. The remaining 217 individuals were scheduled for a clinic, pending review (such as when we are waiting for client documents before we schedule them for a clinic or refer them to a volunteer attorney), or still completing the intake process.

The cases that were open during 2024 covered a wide range of civil legal case types. As VLP noted in our 2023 Application to the MCLSF Commission, family law and related matters remain a substantial focus of our work given the enormous unmet legal need throughout Maine. Family law matters representing 1,135 of our open cases in 2024. VLP's mission also places special emphasis on providing legal help to survivors of domestic violence. Last year, we assisted individuals with 357 family law matters involving domestic violence and 184 Protection From Abuse cases, most of whom were referred by domestic violence resource centers.

Other case type data includes the following:

Case Type	Number of Cases
Benefits	104
Consumer	2
Bankruptcy	82
Employment	79
End of Life/Wills/Estates	107
Small Claims	77
Foreclosure and Housing	17
Miscellaneous (including tort claims, education, and small business/nonprofit)	19

Demographic Information about People Served

VLP collects various forms of demographic information about the people we serve. The age groups of our clients were as follows:

Under age 25	188	10%
Age 25-34	556	30%
Age 35-44	563	30%
Age 45-60	369	20%
Over age 60	184	10%
Unknown	8	

Additional demographic information for our clients includes the following:

- 84% of clients identified as White, 6% as Black, 3% as Hispanic, 2% as Native American, 1.2% as Asian, and 3.3% as other or were unknown.
- 5% of clients did not speak English as a first language.
- 37.5% of clients identified as having a disability.
- 69.9% of clients identified as female, 28.4% as male, and 1.7% were other/no answer.

Geographic Areas Served

The VLP is a statewide organization that connects clients in need with pro bono volunteer attorneys statewide. All programs received requests for assistance from all 16 counties of Maine.

The VLP receives requests for assistance in several ways. The VLP website (www.vlp.org) provides links for potential clients to complete intake request forms or to email requests for help. For those who cannot use the online forms or email, VLP provides an Intake Line, largely staffed by trained community and student volunteers. Individuals can also leave a message to request assistance from our Bangor office. Community partners and legal aid programs refer people to VLP through established warm referral channels. Family law and PFA intakes for survivors of domestic violence come from the domestic violence agencies in Maine through a special referral process. VLP also receives requests for assistance from incarcerated people via regular mail. All potential clients are initially screened for eligibility, and their type of legal problem is reviewed.

If a client is eligible for our help, VLP staff will determine the best program to provide assistance, such as scheduling them to meet with a trained attorney in one of our clinics or referring them for a consultation and possible full representation to a member of our pool of volunteer attorneys located throughout Maine. As described in more detail below, clients can participate in our virtual clinics using Zoom or phone, which ensures that individuals throughout Maine can access attorney assistance through VLP. Free Legal Answers Maine is available statewide for those who can access the internet.

In 2024, cases opened out of the Bangor office, which covers family law and attorney referral matters for the seven Northern counties, comprised 18.5% of VLP’s total cases opened. VLP continues its efforts to increase access to our services in Northern Maine. We expect to hire a new administrative staff member early in the year to enable existing staff to engage in targeted outreach to potential attorney volunteers in that region.

The geographic distribution of VLP clients by county in 2024 is as follows:

<u>County</u>	VLP cases	FLAME	Total	% of Total
Androscoggin	317	33	350	15%
Aroostook	59	25	84	4%
Cumberland	438	78	516	23%
Franklin	42	8	50	2%
Hancock	35	15	50	2%
Kennebec	195	44	239	10%
Knox	30	9	39	2%

Lincoln	39	16	55	2%
Oxford	99	23	122	5%
Penobscot	171	66	237	10%
Piscataquis	25	8	33	1%
Sagadahoc	43	10	53	2%
Somerset	55	24	79	3%
Waldo	44	17	61	3%
Washington	36	13	49	2%
York	186	59	245	11%

(Out of state / Unknown: 55)

Compliance with Proposal to Commission

In its September 2023 application to the Maine Civil Legal Services Fund Commission, VLP described the organization’s overarching goal as “to provide pro bono representation to as many needy Mainers as possible for civil legal matters. Where full representation is not available, VLP seeks to provide litigants with advice and guidance to assist them in representing themselves in the Maine courts.” We also identified a related goal of providing pro bono assistance as a way “to promote physical and economic safety, security, and stability for those individuals and families facing legal problems, and to support the prompt and effective resolution of those legal problems.”

VLP’s dedicated staff and volunteers worked throughout 2024 with these goals in mind. Our 2023 application also identified a series of objectives and action steps to advance those goals. As described below, VLP made good progress in each of these areas as well as others identified during the year.

Improving Intake and Referral Processes

The first objective described in our application was to improve our internal processes for client intake, screening, case preparation, and referrals, all of which are essential to ensuring that we can provide help to those who need it the most. If there is too much delay after someone initially contacts us, we may lose contact with the client. Either they give up or the help is no longer useful to them. If a client is a no-show for a clinic appointment, it can also have an adverse impact on attorney engagement.

During 2024, VLP’s staff undertook several measures designed to increase the accessibility of our intake process for those most in need of our help and shorten the time between when a client initially contacts us for assistance and when they meet with an attorney. To lower barriers to requesting help through VLP, we improved the ways people contact us directly as well as

referrals from other organizations. We enhanced our website, including updating and improving information for those who are seeking legal help to clarify the kinds of matters we can help with and to provide information and other potential sources of assistance.

We also made enhancements to our warm referral process to make it faster and easier for community partners to refer their clients to us. For example, we developed a new online referral form specifically for use by domestic violence resource centers throughout Maine. We developed a special partnership with the Maine Peer Workforce Navigator Project to accept referrals to assist clients seeking unemployment insurance benefits, many of whom are immigrants and face particular challenges when representing themselves. These benefits can be critically important for ensuring that someone who loses a job can maintain housing, meet their essential needs, and prepare to re-enter the workforce. We developed a streamlined referral process to ensure we can promptly refer those cases for pro bono representation at the client's appeals hearing. We also worked with staff at Preble Street to update and improve our warm referral process for their clients.

We added a part-time Intake Specialist to our staff so that we can process intakes more quickly and professionally. Some intakes require special skill, particularly for survivors of domestic violence and sexual assault. Our new Intake Specialist is an LCSW with extensive experience working with people experiencing homelessness, domestic violence, and other trauma and new Mainers. The addition of this staff member has shortened the time for responding to initial requests for help from 2 to 3 weeks to less than 2 weeks during most of the year. It has also freed up other staff who previously conducted intakes to schedule clients for appointments and make referrals to attorney volunteers.

We also made substantial progress on our new online intake process, which we will launch in early 2025. This state-of-the-art system enables clients to submit detailed requests for assistance and information directly through a simple, mobile-friendly platform. It will replace our current online forms to make the process easier to use and get these requests for help into our system faster. The system will automate the initial steps and eliminate the inefficiencies caused by staff manually setting up the request in our case management system.

We have also improved student and community volunteer training for telephone and other intake interviews and developed a detailed written intake manual to improve the quality and thoroughness of intake interviews, which also reduces staff time and decreases delays in processing requests for help.

Updating Attorney Database

Another objective identified in our 2023 application is to continue to update our database of attorney volunteers, an essential tool for identifying potential volunteers for specific clients. The attorney profiles must keep up with the rapid changes in the Maine bar, such as when attorneys change firms or practice areas or retire. However, this is labor intensive work. We were able to make several updates and corrections with the assistance of student volunteers from the University of Maine School of Law, who contacted attorneys to ensure that our information was up to date. We added a new Administrative Coordinator position to our staff this fall, and that staff member implemented the many updates to our database identified by the students' efforts.

Improvements to Family Law and Domestic Violence Programs

Our application also described our objective to improve our family law clinics and domestic work during the grant period and continue to use technology to deliver services. We made several enhancements in this area during 2024. A return to walk-in clinics remains a key goal for VLP, but we have had great resistance from our attorney volunteers to providing consultations in person. As of now, the only location where we have had success re-launching walk-in family law clinics is our Lewiston CHAP. We also expanded our virtual CHAPs by holding additional sessions during several weeks in the summer when we saw an increase in requests for assistance. We developed a new collaboration with the Clinics at Maine Law through which student attorneys, under the supervision of faculty, provided CHAP consultations to clients. This enabled us to serve more clients with the added benefit of training future CHAP pro bono attorneys.

As noted above, our special relationship with the domestic violence resource centers throughout Maine enables us to connect volunteer attorneys with survivors who need legal help with family law and protection from abuse matters. We continued to provide help to these clients through Helpline and, as noted earlier, developed a new warm referral form to streamline referrals from DVRCs. An important partner is Caring Unlimited, the York County DVRC. They identified significant unmet legal needs in PFA matters, and during 2024, VLP laid the groundwork and recruited volunteers for a new PFA panel in Biddeford District Court. We did a “trial run” of the new program in early December, and the program launched on January 16, 2025.

We offered several free continuing legal education programs geared toward current and potential volunteers in our family law and domestic violence programs. In February, we provided a presentation by Barbara Taylor, Esq. on Spotting Immigration Issues in Family Law Cases, which 35 attorneys attended. Attorney Taylor developed a special manual for VLP volunteer attorneys on this topic and has made herself available for consultations for attorneys working with immigrants. We held a free full-day training (with in-person and remote participation options) about representing clients in PFA matters, which was attended by 34 attorneys. We also conducted a free virtual Family Law Basics training on September 11, attended by 40 attorneys, to expand our volunteer pool and improve the quality of assistance provided through this program. We make the recordings and materials from these programs available to all attorney volunteers through our website.

Finally, to enhance the support we provide to our volunteer attorneys in these programs, we launched quarterly “check in” meetings for CHAP, Helpline, and Portland PFA Panel volunteers. These meetings provide an opportunity to share important information and updates with the volunteers and to discuss questions and challenges that arise in the volunteers’ work with clients in these programs.

Expanding Limited Representation Clinics

VLP provides a substantial amount of pro bono services through our many limited representation clinics. Most of our clinics operate virtually enabling us to serve clients in every county throughout the state. They are conducted via videoconference or telephone, eliminating the need for clients to travel to receive our help. Although clients receive limited representation through these legal clinics, the services are nonetheless highly beneficial. Attorneys provide crucial

guidance to people who must represent themselves in civil matters in Maine courts. They help litigants understand the process and rules of court and provide advice about the critical elements the party must address to be successful with their claim. Attorneys also assist clients with completing paperwork and preparing for a hearing or mediation. These services not only benefit the clients but also help the court system function more effectively and efficiently by providing answers to litigants before they arrive at the courthouse. Without such support, the person needing a divorce or to defend against a debt collection will be forced to ask the court clerk or the judge for help presenting their case. Not only can the court not provide legal advice, but the questions and the litigant's lack of information inevitably cause delays in the court management of the case. Those delays ripple through the system, meaning that all who are seeking relief from Maine courts will have to wait longer.

Further, limited representation can help potential litigants understand whether they have a claim at all, whether it makes sense to file the court case in the first place, and, if so, what they can reasonably expect from the court process. Providing this information reduces unnecessary filings and untenable claims made to the court. It also promotes satisfaction from the person seeking a legal remedy, as they understand what results are possible and likely. The litigant is more likely to have a positive experience, promoting confidence in our legal system.

Finally, the clinics provide an important way for attorneys who may be unable or hesitant to provide in-person or extended assistance to nonetheless engage in valuable pro bono service. We have developed a pool of highly dedicated attorney volunteers, some of whom participate in the clinics on a weekly or biweekly basis and help us train new volunteers.

We described above the many enhancements to our family law and domestic violence limited representation clinics over the last year. In addition, VLP launched an entirely new clinic in response to community need. Starting in 2023, VLP noticed a sharp uptick in people contacting us with questions about pursuing bankruptcy. At the same time, the Maine bankruptcy bar has gotten smaller, which means our pool of available volunteer attorneys to accept those referrals has also shrunk. VLP even had to briefly suspend intake for those matters in 2023.

To address that unmet need, we launched a virtual Bankruptcy Clinic during the summer. That clinic follows the same basic format as VLP's other limited representation clinics. We hold a two-hour clinic every 3-4 weeks, during which the scheduled volunteer attorney provides brief consultations (about 30 minutes) via phone or Zoom with about 4 clients. The intake information and documents for each client are provided to the volunteer attorney before the clinic to provide a general idea of the client's situation before the consultation. This model of providing streamlined legal help is particularly appropriate for bankruptcy matters because many people who contact us for help are not ideal candidates for bankruptcy due to their income, assets, or the size and nature of their debt. Accordingly, the attorney volunteer can explain this to the client and suggest other ways to address their debt and protect their assets. If the attorney recommends that the client file for bankruptcy, the VLP staff will then try to place the case with an attorney volunteer for full representation. Attorneys are more likely to accept such referrals when they know an experienced bankruptcy attorney has already reviewed the client's situation.

So far, the program has been highly successful. We recruited several attorney volunteers and held 10 clinics during 2024. The program is a useful way to provide information quickly to clients and to enable us to identify which clients really need to be referred for extended assistance, including filing for bankruptcy. Out of the 47 clients assisted through the clinic in 2024, only 19 were advised to pursue bankruptcy. The clients expressed great appreciation for the advice they received, and the volunteer attorneys told us that they thought it was time well spent and a satisfying volunteer experience.

Enhancing Pro Bono Engagement Efforts and Increasing Attorney Recruitment

Our model of providing legal assistance depends on our success with attorney recruitment and engagement, and those efforts were also a central focus of our work during 2024. We employed a wide range of strategies to expand our pool of attorney volunteers and to encourage those attorneys to volunteer more frequently.

We offered several free continuing legal education programs during 2024 on various topics. In addition to the three programs addressing family law and domestic violence topics noted above, we provided a training on representing pro bono clients in unemployment insurance appeals in October 2024, which was attended by 23 attorneys.

The Justice Andrew M. Mead Fellowship for Pro Bono Service is a program specifically designed to facilitate the pro bono service of attorneys who are new to the Maine bar. Our 2024 cohort of seven Fellows participated in several trainings and events to prepare them for pro bono service and to encourage them to make such service a regular part of their practice. This included programs about trial, appellate, and federal court practice as well as ethical considerations in pro bono representation. The Fellows all participated in pro bono service and shadowed other volunteers. We have recently launched the 2025 Mead Fellowship with another cohort of 7 Fellows.

VLP staff participated in several events to raise awareness about opportunities to provide pro bono service. These included the MSBA New Lawyers Section Pro Bono Fair, the MSBA Summer Bar Meeting, bar swearing in ceremonies, county bar meetings, the Maine Trial Lawyers Association Annual Meeting, Maine Employment Lawyers Association meeting, and MSBA's Bar Talk program.

A significant project aimed at enhancing attorney recruitment during 2024 was a complete rebuild of the attorney recruitment page of our website and the limited-access attorney resource area of the website. These sections of the website provide updated and expanded information about volunteer opportunities through VLP and extensive resources to help attorney volunteers provide high-quality legal help, including recordings from past trainings and reference materials.

To free up the staff members, especially our Pro Bono Engagement Director, to participate in attorney recruitment efforts, VLP hired a part-time administrative coordinator in September 2025. This employee covers much of the administrative work involved in our training programs and general operations. We hope to expand her hours during 2025.

Finally, VLP staff participate in the Justice Action Group Pro Bono Committee. One of the primary projects of that committee in 2024 was advocacy to the Maine Supreme Judicial Court for an amendment to Maine Bar Rule 5 to allow attorneys to receive continuing legal education (CLE) credit for pro bono service. That effort was successful, and the SJC announced the rule amendment at the end of 2024. We expect the availability of CLE credit will serve as a further incentive for attorneys to begin or expand their involvement in VLP programs.

Outcome Measures Used to Determine Compliance

Our 2023 application noted a number of ways that VLP evaluates the effectiveness of our programs. One measure is the number of people served through our programs. Another is whether those served had the benefit of direct assistance from an attorney as opposed to receiving only legal information or a referral to another program. This number increased slightly in 2024.

Another outcome measure of our program is the number pro bono attorneys who participate in our program and the extent of the services they provide. In 2024, at least 168 Maine attorneys volunteering through VLP provided over 2,180 hours of pro bono services to the people of Maine. Based on an estimated average rate of \$200 per hour, VLP's volunteer attorneys provided over \$436,000 worth of legal services for free to Mainers in need.

The above figure does not reflect the actual number of hours of pro hours donated by the Maine bar through VLP programs. Attorneys who accept full representation referrals self-report their hours and generally do not do so until the matter is closed. Some attorneys never provide this data to us. We have taken steps during 2024 to improve this data collection such as enhancing the case reporting forms, checking in more frequently with attorney volunteers, and emphasizing with our volunteers the importance of tracking and reporting hours.

In 2025, we plan to expand our outcome measures by developing an online client questionnaire to gather quantitative and qualitative data about their experience working with VLP staff and volunteer attorneys.

An additional measure is staff retention, which has been a challenge for VLP in past years. VLP is currently fully staffed with dedicated and talented people. We added two additional staff positions during 2024, and there was no staff turnover.

Unmet and Underserved Needs

There are many individuals with civil legal problems who are unable to access legal help. Some of those legal needs are in the case types where we do not have a sufficient pool of volunteer attorneys available to provide assistance. Those case types include:

- **Minor and Adult Guardianship:** These probate actions require specialized knowledge of the probate courts and procedures. Due to the structure of the probate courts in Maine, the speed at which the cases progress through the court system is slow relative to state court. They are family matters with complex emotions and can involve sensitive issues, including custody of a child or the ability of an older or disabled person to make

decisions for themselves. The number of attorneys who practice in this area is low. VLP has a very difficult time finding volunteer attorneys to provide pro bono services in this type of case.

- **Probate and Estate Planning.** We regularly receive requests from people who need assistance with probate-related matters. These include people who have disputes with family members regarding estate administration, which can threaten their housing if the dispute concerns real estate. We also hear from many people seeking assistance with end-of-life documents and estate planning. Even people with very modest assets can have concerns about the disposition of their property after they pass on. We accept and attempt to place for referral those cases where someone's health, housing, or financial security are at stake, but we do not have a sufficient pool of attorneys to be able to place even some of those more compelling cases.
- **Foreclosure.** Although we do not receive requests for assistance at the same rate as during the mortgage and foreclosure crisis from several years ago, we do regularly hear from people at risk of losing their homes due to foreclosure. We can provide some assistance through our bankruptcy clinic but do not have attorney volunteers available to accept these as full representation referrals.
- **Rental Housing.** We also receive requests for help with a range of rental housing issues including eviction and unsafe housing conditions. We routinely refer eviction matters to Pine Tree Legal Assistance, but they cannot assist everyone and often cannot help with other disputes with landlords. We attempt to refer these but often cannot place them with attorneys in time to help.
- **Family Matters:** As noted in our application, family law is one of the greatest areas of unmet legal needs in Maine and we receive more requests for help with these matters than any other. The CHAP clinics and Family Law Helpline are helpful to many people. However, full representation in family matters is still needed by many, especially survivors of domestic violence, people with disabilities and/or mental health problems, those with language or literacy problems, and others. We are able to refer a handful of cases for extended representation each year, but few attorneys are willing to provide this level of pro bono assistance. We have also been trying to recruit attorneys to volunteer for in-house CHAPs, such as the one we launched in Lewiston earlier this year. However, as noted above, attorneys remain reluctant to provide in-person assistance.
- **Cases involving the Department of Health and Human Services:** Many people come to VLP every year with problems that relate to their interactions with DHHS, including child protection and elder abuse matters. Although parents with low-incomes are entitled to court-appointed counsel once a child protection matter has been filed in court, parents cannot access expert legal guidance during the pre-filing phase, where they could benefit from advice about how to address a situation. To effectively advocate for a client involved with DHHS, an attorney needs specialized training and knowledge of the administrative and legal procedures available. Attorneys with this training and experience are generally on the court-appointed counsel list, and those attorneys are not generally available for volunteer work.
- **Protection From Harassment.** We receive many requests for help from people who are litigants in Protection From Harassment cases. While we provided extensive assistance

for survivors of domestic violence and sexual assault seeking PFA orders, we do not have volunteers available to provide help with PFH cases.

- **Administrative Law:** VLP receives requests from people who have problems with their health insurance or medical provider, a dispute with a municipality, or a dispute with a government agency. In most cases, VLP does not accept these cases for referral because we do not have volunteer attorneys available on our roster to volunteer for pro bono administrative law service.

C. Conclusion

By organizing donated services of private attorneys and community volunteers and by pioneering new service models, VLP provides high-quality legal assistance for Maine people who would otherwise go without such help. VLP continues to develop opportunities for pro bono service for attorneys at all stages of their careers and in all areas of practice while innovating new ways for Maine people to access these services.

The funds received by VLP from the Maine Civil Legal Services Fund in 2024 were critical to our organization and supported our work in all programs described in this report. We look forward to continuing to innovate and expand our services over the next year.

Respectfully submitted,

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