



Maine Women's Lobby

THE VOICE OF MAINE WOMEN

Testimony of Whitney Parrish
Maine Women's Lobby
In support of LD 214
An Act to Increase Funding for Civil Legal Services
February 28, 2019

Senator Carpenter, Representative Bailey, and distinguished members of the Joint Standing Committee on Judiciary, my name is Whitney Parrish, Director of Policy and Program for the Maine Women's Lobby. The Maine Women's Lobby is a nonprofit, nonpartisan, statewide membership organization devoted to raising the economic, social, and political status of Maine's 678,000 women and girls.

I am pleased to speak to you today in support of LD 214, *An Act to Increase Funding for Civil Legal Services*.

No one should have to be their own lawyer as they seek protection from a partner who has been systematically abusing them. No one should have to be their own lawyer as they engage Family Matters court to navigate a complex Parental Rights and Responsibilities case where their child's safety hinges on the outcome. No one should have to figure out how to bifurcate a lease to avoid eviction without being able to seek legal advice. No child, shaking on the stand holding their teddy bear, should have to be aggressively cross-examined by their allegedly abusive parent because that parent lacked access to legal representation. These are all situations I witnessed throughout my time as a domestic violence advocate, and I will never forget the outcomes. Equal access to legal representation in the justice system is critical to avoiding these situations, ending poverty, combating discrimination, and creating opportunity for so many individuals, especially our most vulnerable Mainers.ⁱ

As we have heard, civil legal aid is a combination of critical services and resources that helps Mainers of many backgrounds, especially low to middle income women, LGBTQ+ individuals, and their families. Women, women of color, and LGBTQ+ people are disproportionately impacted by this issue because they tend to live closer to the margins for a number of reasons, namely due to occupying low paying jobs, unsupportive workplace policies, and lack of affordable child care.ⁱⁱ Combine this with systemic discrimination, lack of resources and support systems, and the reality that women are more likely to

ⁱ Buckwalter-Poza, Rebecca. *Making Justice Equal*. Center for American Progress. Accessed at <https://www.americanprogress.org/issues/criminal-justice/reports/2016/12/08/294479/making-justice-equal/>

ⁱⁱ *NWLC Resources on Poverty, Income, and Health Insurance in 2017*. National Women's Law Center. 2017. Accessed at <https://nwc.org/resources/nwlc-resources-on-poverty-income-and-health-insurance-in-2017/>

295 Water Street, Suite 10, Augusta, ME 04330 • 207.622.0851
wparrish@mainewomen.org
www.mainewomen.org



Maine Women's Lobby

THE VOICE OF MAINE WOMEN

face certain types of legal issues, and you will find that these are Mainers who are often hit hardest by lack of civil legal aid and the aptly named “justice gap.”ⁱⁱⁱ

Because of woefully underfunded civil legal aid services, women with lower incomes disproportionately act as their own lawyer in some of the most critical and potentially life changing court proceedings of their lives, including those that determine safety and protections from abuse, child custody determinations, and whether they will obtain financial support to feed their children and support their families.

Everyone should have the opportunity to know their rights and have quicker and more even-handed legal outcomes. Everyone should have access to justice, regardless of their ability to afford it, gender identity, race, immigration status, or ability. To deny a person living in the U.S. access to legal assistance is to deny them their rights and protections. LD 214 is a critical step toward ensuring equal access to justice across Maine, especially for our most vulnerable. We urge you to vote ought to pass on LD 214. Thank you.

ⁱⁱⁱ Ibid.