

**Testimony of Donna Galluzzo, Executive Director, Fannie Peabody Center
LD 214 An Act to Increase Funding for Civil Legal Services
Before the Joint Standing Committee on Judiciary – February 28, 2019**

Senator Carpenter, Representative Bailey and esteemed members of the Joint Standing Committee on Judiciary.

My name is Donna Galluzzo, I'm currently the executive director of Frannie Peabody Center – Maine's largest and longest serving AIDS Service organization. I'm here to speak today in support of LD 214, An Act to Increase Funding for Civil Legal Services.

Due to their HIV status, sexual orientation, race, ethnicity, immigration and asylum-seeking status, socio-economic status or struggles with addiction and recovery, we serve many of the most stigmatized people currently living in the state of Maine.

I recently spoke to the Joint Standing Committee on Health and Human Services about the continued presence of stigma, and the significant impediment it can be to community outreach, prevention and retention in care for those at-risk and living with HIV.

As this Judiciary Committee knows, stigma is the foundation of discrimination and discriminatory practices. We have witnessed, first hand, unfair housing practices for clients who receive subsidies – even when agency name and HIV status is unknown. Despite laws that are already in place, with a fast-paced and high-profit real estate market, building owners and landlords are willing to suffer the financial consequences of breaking lease agreements or flagrantly ignoring anti-discrimination policies and laws because the potential profits far outweigh the consequences.

Without proper, or without any, legal representation, clients can find themselves at risk of losing housing, or living in uncertain and unstable housing situations. The cascading effect of these situations is significant. As research has shown, stable housing is a basic foundational need for improved physical and mental health, adherence to medication, job and income stability, and more. Without stable housing, access to other social services undoubtedly increases putting a significant financial strain on town, city and state resources. Again, with more accessible civil legal aid, the negative social and financial ripple effects of unfair housing practices would absolutely decrease.

We also know that our clients need and seek legal advice and counsel for issues related to domestic violence. Sadly, someone's HIV status can be used to hold power over them, and in cases where one or both parties do not speak English as a first language, the party with more proficient languages skills can also hold power over the recipient of the abuse. Even when local law enforcement is engaged, a person's HIV status, the role of stigma, substance use, a person's gender, sexual orientation, language proficiency and immigration status can all still be used to silence and hold power over victims. We are all aware of the emotional damage caused by the cycle of domestic violence. As a community services organization, and as elected public servants, I know that we are all keenly aware that the cycle of domestic violence presents a significant strain on community resources such as law enforcement, health services, public housing and more.

When someone who is experiencing domestic violence feels that they have no legal recourse or no accessible and affordable legal representation, they often feel that they have no viable options. Sustained and long-term abuse contributes significantly to issues such as substance use, mental health, child welfare, unstable housing and erratic employment. Once again, these co-occurring issues place a significant financial and capacity strain on community resources.

The most significant need we see for civil legal aid is within our immigrant, refugee and asylum-seeking clients. Our immigrant clients are no different from any other immigrants and immigrant families who have sought new lives and refuge within the borders of these United States. We see so many educated professionals, political activists, concerned parents and multi-lingual speakers who are anxious to find stable housing and willing to work long hours and multiple jobs so that they can support their families both here in the US and in their native countries. They are anxious to contribute, willing to work jobs that are difficult to fill because of late shift work or challenging duties, and with stable housing and employment they stay adherent to medication and become remarkably self-sufficient very quickly.

We have witnessed first-hand and heard countless first-hand accounts of clients who have been forced to engage legal counsel, to keep their applications for residency or permanent status moving forward, from those who are unfamiliar with such processes and often unprepared, uninformed or overwhelmed. Due to language barriers, common issues include minor inconsistencies in the stories of those who find themselves in volatile situations at refugee camps and war-torn villages. Clients can experience and/or witness unspeakable atrocities – as horrible as sexual assault or the witnessing of great physical harm (even death) of loved ones – as they find themselves fleeing their homes and often breaking apart their families. Clients may experience PTSD from personal experiences of harm, or simply through the incredibly stressful circumstances of being forced to abruptly leave home and family. Great emotional strain and/or documented PTSD is more than enough to account for such minor inconsistencies.

Anyone seeking professional advice would aspire to work with someone who is practiced at their craft and, in particular, with specialty work unique to a given situation. With such a high need for these civil legal services, juxtaposed to the limited capacity of professionals and resources available, clients often find themselves in unrepresented or underrepresented legal situations.

Also, as I have indicated throughout this testimony, when civil legal services are unavailable or under-resourced, a tremendous financial burden is placed on our social service system. There have been numerous studies in social service disciplines that document and articulate the disproportionately high cost of all social services when patients and clients are not receiving the kind of assistance that expedites their process to a more permanent state of independence. The financial, social and emotional benefits of providing a more appropriate scale of civil legal aid are clear and authentic.

I urge you to support LD 214 as a means of endorsing a more efficient, cost-effective and successful civil legal system through providing a more appropriate scale of civil legal aid. Passage of LD 214 ultimately puts more real dollars back into Maine's economy, provides a greater scale of civil legal aid to those who are in need and will have a real and discernable positive impact on the lives of those living and working in Maine.

Thank you.