



IMMIGRANT LEGAL ADVOCACY PROJECT

March 4, 2022

**Testimony of Susan Roche, Executive Director of the Immigrant Legal Advocacy Project
in Support of Part JJ of the Supplemental Budget (LD 1995)**

Senator Breen, Representative Pierce, and esteemed members of the Appropriations and Financial Affairs Committee:

My name is Susan Roche, and I am the Executive Director of the Immigrant Legal Advocacy Project (ILAP). ILAP is Maine's only comprehensive, state-wide immigration legal aid organization. Our mission is to help low-income immigrants improve their legal status and to advocate for more just and humane laws and policies impacting immigrants.

I submit this written testimony in support of Part JJ of the Supplemental Budget (LD 1995). The one-time funding for civil legal aid in the proposed budget is a great start toward supporting critical legal aid infrastructure to increase access to justice in Maine. What is ultimately needed, however, is ongoing funding to increase legal services capacity to meet unmet legal needs of people who cannot afford legal assistance.

ILAP is one of the six civil legal aid organizations that would benefit from this funding to help low-income Mainers navigate our civil legal systems when they face life changing problems.

ILAP has offices in Portland and Lewiston, and a Rural Maine Project serving clients in all sixteen counties. Each year, ILAP staff and over 175 pro bono attorneys help more than 3,000 clients, including asylum seekers, abused and neglected children who qualify for Special Immigrant Juvenile Status, and immigrant victims of domestic violence and trafficking. We also provide community education and outreach, and we participate in systemic advocacy to improve our immigration laws and policies.

The need for ILAP's services continues to grow as Maine welcomes more immigrants, refugees, and asylum seekers to the state. This includes hundred of asylum seekers who have recently arrived from the southern border, Afghan evacuees who need to apply for asylum, and the anticipation of people fleeing Ukraine and other war zones. Without work authorization and legal status, they will be unable to integrate fully into Maine's economy or communities. ILAP is the only place they can turn to for free immigration legal aid.

Statistics show that someone is five times more likely to win their case in immigration court if they have a lawyer. ILAP maintains a success rate of over 95% for cases reaching a final decision. Unfortunately, we have to turn away hundreds of clients each year, including children and asylum seekers, because we lack the capacity to serve them. COVID-19 has further exacerbated the need, as immigrants have been disproportionately impacted by the pandemic.

For ILAP, the Maine Civil Legal Services Fund (MCLSF) is our only substantial form of government funding and one of our only recurring sources of unrestricted funding specifically designated for civil legal aid, but it is not enough to meet the growing demand. We are ineligible for most federal funding because we serve clients who do not yet have permanent legal status. We rely upon private donors and funders for most of our support, and that funding is subject to shifting priorities and changing donor interests.

This increased funding would allow ILAP to help more people who are now forced to navigate the complex immigration system on their own.

This client story is an example of ILAP's impact:

"Samuel" grew up in a country in Central Africa, where he was routinely beaten and neglected by both of his parents. When he was just a young teen, his mother brought him to the US and abandoned him in the care of a distant relative.

Free from his parents' abuse and supported by his community, Samuel thrived – becoming a standout student and athlete. But without parental support, he lacked any guidance on his immigration case. Only when his college athletic scholarship was rescinded did Samuel realize he needed legal help.

He came to ILAP just before he would have aged out of eligibility for Special Immigrant Juvenile Status, an immigration status for abused, neglected, or abandoned children. ILAP worked closely with a pro bono attorney we recruited to help Samuel obtain the state court order that he needed, with the required language for his immigration case. ILAP rushed to prepare and file his case, and Samuel received his green card this past year. He is now able to pursue his college plans and dreams for the future.