

DATE: January 15, 2025  
TO: Joint Standing Committee on Education & Cultural Affairs  
Joint Standing Committee on Judiciary  
Joint Standing Committee on Appropriations & Financial Affairs  
FROM: President/Dean Leigh Saufley, University of Maine School of Law  
RE: **Report on the Success of Maine Law's Rural Practice Clinic**

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The [University of Maine School of Law](#) (Maine Law) is the state's only and public law school. In just the last decade, Maine Law has conferred nearly 800 J.D. degrees and through its clinics, student attorneys have provided an estimated 140,000 hours of free legal aid to those in need.

In recognition of this tradition of leadership and excellence in preparing the state's attorney workforce and providing essential legal services, the 130th Maine Legislature endorsed Maine Law's proposal to [pilot a rural practice clinic \(RPC\) in Aroostook County](#). Funding for the first two years of the pilot was generously provided by the Office of the Maine Attorney General with the strong support of Attorney General Aaron Frey as well as the Legislature and Governor Janet Mills.

The pilot RPC opened in January 2023 in an on-campus office space donated by the University of Maine at Fort Kent (UMFK), which is located in the historically underserved St. John Valley. UMFK also provided participating RPC students housing in its on-campus residence hall. Through the clinic, Maine Law students provide free legal aid services to low-income Mainers in the region under the supervision of an experienced licensed attorney. The initiative additionally helps prepare students to successfully practice upon graduation while introducing them to the unique challenges and opportunities of doing so in rural Maine.

In the first two years of operation, a total of 13 Maine Law student attorneys served 113 low-income clients through the RPC, assisting them with civil and criminal matters, including, but not limited to, debt collection, domestic violence, family matters, landlord-tenant disputes, and preliminary criminal proceedings. Most clients lived in Aroostook County, but student attorneys also served people from Penobscot, Piscataquis, Somerset and Waldo Counties. Clients were represented in district courts in Fort Kent, Houlton, Madawaska, Millinocket, Newport, Presque Isle and West Bath, as well as at the Aroostook Probate Court.

Participating students have been overwhelmingly positive about their RPC experiences, noting both the impact on their own career development and on the lives of their clients. "I worked with a client who was getting a divorce. Her husband was treating her poorly,

including acting abusively toward her. If the Rural Practice Clinic had not helped her, she likely would not have been able to afford a lawyer and would not have the security she does now or the opportunity to move forward with her life,” reflected Maine Law student attorney Christian Jones.

Establishing the RPC was not without its challenges, directly reinforcing the need for this innovative program. Key among them was finding a licensed attorney in Aroostook County who could supervise the students, as the handful of those already practicing in the region had overwhelming caseloads and/or would likely be conflicted on most cases. Following an initial start with a local attorney who was hired away to lead the state’s new Rural Defender Unit, the RPC relied on a retired judge to serve as the supervising attorney and in 2024, a licensed attorney faculty member from Maine Law, Professor Christopher Northrop, moved to Fort Kent to oversee the students, underscoring Maine Law’s commitment to the clinic’s success. This model has presented new opportunities, including that Professor Northrop can teach undergraduate courses at UMFK, including constitutional law, and inspire students there to pursue legal education and careers.

While it is premature to say the RPC has resulted in more Maine Law students going into practice in rural regions after graduation, those who served in the clinic considered doing so far more seriously than before participating. “As a student attorney in the Rural Practice Clinic earning 12 credits a semester, I was able to dive deep and really focus on my cases, providing me with a comprehensive learning experience. After my semester in Fort Kent, I was inspired to pursue job opportunities in rural communities after I graduate Maine Law,” said Margeaux Lavoie, who is expected to graduate with her J.D. in May 2025.

### **Next Steps and Recommendations**

Because of its initial impact and renewed funding from the Office of the Maine Attorney General, the RPC has transitioned from a pilot to a long-term rural clinical program, existing under the umbrella of [the Clinics at Maine Law](#) (formerly known as the Cumberland Legal Aid Clinic). Collectively, the Clinics serve more than 600 clients and provide more than 14,000 hours of pro bono legal aid annually.

Of the initial \$680,000 grant from the Office of the Maine Attorney General intended to support the pilot in 2023 and 2024, thanks to Maine Law’s prudent fiscal management, \$157,250 remains, which will fund the rural clinic through June 30, 2025. AG Aaron Frey has further committed to fund the RPC in Aroostook County for two additional years (through June 2027). e.

Longer term, Maine Law hopes to expand the RPC from northern Maine to other underserved regions in the state, likely in partnership with other public universities in the University of Maine System that can provide client meeting space and student attorney

housing to defray program costs as UMFK has generously done. Regions that have been discussed as potential future RPC sites include Western Maine (through partnership with the University of Maine at Farmington) and Downeast Maine (through partnership with the University of Maine at Machias, which is a regional campus of the University of Maine). In order to do so, Maine Law would need to secure a permanent funding source for the RPC, likely through a new State appropriation that would start in the 133rd Maine Legislature (FY28-29 biennial budget) and be ongoing.

Thanks to existing State funding provided by the Governor and Legislature to the University of Maine System (Educational & General Activities), Maine Law remains one of the most affordable law schools in the nation and the debt load of its graduates (\$75,000) is about half the national law school average. Maintaining this affordable access is essential to Maine Law's graduates going into rural practice and public services, where salaries are lower and thus it is harder to discharge higher levels of student debt. Increasing appropriation for UMS, at or above the levels proposed in Governor Mills' FY26-27 biennial budget, is essential to our ability to remain affordable and to recruit and retain dedicated faculty and staff who support the success of Maine Law students and promote access to justice.

To further strengthen the provisions of legal aid through the Clinics at Maine Law and pathways to practice in rural communities, where 60% of Maine's population lives, the Legislature may additionally wish to consider:

- Establishing a loan repayment/forgiveness program, likely through the Finance Authority of Maine, targeted at those who commit to practicing in rural and/or underserved areas, for legal aid service providers, etc.
- Expanding Maine Law's existing Rural Practice Summer Intern/Fellowship program, which is a proven model that addresses both short-term needs for legal services in rural communities and longer-term rural attorney workforce development. Specifically, targeted State appropriation could support additional supervising faculty and student stipends.
- Providing more funding for Maine's Civil Legal Services Fund, which supports the Clinics at Maine Law and other nonprofit legal aid providers.

Maine Law and the broader University of Maine System remain committed to partnering with the Legislature, the Office of the Maine Attorney General, and other stakeholders to build upon the success of the RPC to further expand access to justice for vulnerable populations and grow Maine's rural attorney workforce. We are proud that the RPC has recently been highlighted by the U.S. Department of Justice as a promising model for addressing the shortage of lawyers in rural America. We welcome the opportunity to discuss the Rural Practice Clinic with your Committees or any interested parties and invite you to visit the RPC in Fort Kent or other Maine Law clinic programs to experience first-hand how our student attorneys are helping to meet Maine's indigent legal needs.