

PINE TREE LEGAL ASSISTANCE

Legal Assistance 0553

	<u>Actual</u>	<u>Current</u>	<u>Budgeted</u>	<u>Budgeted</u>
GENERAL FUND	2019-20	2020- 21	2021-22	2022- 23
All Other	\$500,000	\$500,000	\$500,000	\$500,000
GENERAL FUND TOTAL	\$500,000	\$500,000	\$500,000	\$500,000

Pine Tree Legal Assistance [PTLA] has received an appropriation from the General Fund since 1983 to support the provision of legal assistance to low-income Maine residents around the State. LD 221 proposes flat funding at \$500,000/year, continuing an annual appropriation level set by Governor LePage, which has been in effect since 2015.

PTLA is Maine’s oldest and largest provider of free legal services to low-income Maine residents with serious civil legal problems. It handles cases that are not eligible for court-appointed counsel through the Maine Commission on Indigent Legal Services. Roughly 50% of all cases involve housing issues (including landlord/tenant matters and foreclosure proceedings); other important priorities include protection from domestic violence and sexual assault, financial stability, access to education, and enforcement of state and federal laws affecting agricultural workers, Native Americans, and veterans. PTLA staff and volunteers screen requests and then provide legal help through a network of local field offices (Portland, Lewiston, Augusta, Bangor, Machias and Presque Isle.)

Many of Pine Tree's clients are the working poor: people who work 40 hours a week in minimum wage jobs and support a spouse and children. Others are single parents trying to provide a stable family life for their children. Some are adults with significant disabilities who are struggling to live independently. As a result of increased outreach and shifting resources around the State, four particularly vulnerable client populations need legal services from PTLA:

- Client households that include someone with a disability: in 2020, they represented more than a third of all clients served.
- Victims of domestic violence, sexual assault, or trafficking: in 2020, they represented 18% of all cases handled.
- Veteran households and low-income military families: in 2020, they represented more than 11% of all clients served.
- Low-income children and youth: in 2020, direct legal services benefitted more than 6,100 children and youth.

The State appropriation has become increasingly important as other general funding sources have steadily declined. In calendar year 2021, 78% of the PTLA budget comes from short-term grants and contracts. Most of these funders do not cover the full costs of legal assistance, making general funds essential to meet those commitments. General funding also allows staff to handle specific legal needs that are not prioritized by other funders, such as legal services for Maine veterans.

PTLA Justification Statement for LD 221 prepared by PTLA Executive Director Nan Heald

State funding also provides a source of matching funds for specific projects that require a match from non-federal general funds. For instance, PTLA operates Maine's only low-income taxpayer clinic [LITC] providing free help to residents facing IRS disputes that can involve thousands of dollars. The grant requires a 'dollar for dollar' match from non-federal funds and a portion of our State appropriation helps underwrite this tax work each year.

Every dollar of State funding is used carefully by Pine Tree's dedicated staff in providing legal assistance to as many individuals as possible, given limited resources. Despite the challenges of the pandemic in 2020:

- PTLA handled more than 6,300 cases affecting almost 16,000 low-income Mainers.
- PTLA websites (including www.ptla.org, www.kidslegal.org and www.statesidelegal.org) recorded more than 3 million page views and drew more than 1.6 million unique visitors.
- Local PTLA trainings, consultations and presentations on important legal rights and benefits reached more than 3,800 individuals.

Some State funding is also used to respond to requests from legislators or administration officials regarding matters within Pine Tree staff expertise, and to serve on various advisory commissions at the request of local or state officials. Because of federal funding restrictions, these requests cannot be handled without funding from the State.