

## Pine Tree Legal Assistance

### State of Maine General Funds AFA Response

O.F.P.R.  
2009 SEP -1 PM 3:42

Pine Tree Legal Assistance is currently funded at \$264,345 per year from the General Fund to provide free individual legal services to low-income Maine residents with serious civil legal problems. At present, those services are provided through a network of local field offices (Portland, Lewiston, Augusta, Bangor, Machias and Presque Isle) as well as special statewide projects serving Native Americans, migrant farmworkers, and low-income children, as well as the Volunteer Lawyers Project, which leverages over \$2,140,660 million in donated services each year.

State funding has been used to support direct client services around the State and to leverage other federal and private grants that require matching funds from non-federal sources. In 2009, this group includes grants that support:

- legal assistance to low-income taxpayers facing problems with the IRS,
- several different funding sources that allow expanded foreclosure advocacy,
- support for victims of domestic violence and sexual assault,
- enforcement of state and federal housing discrimination laws.

Pine Tree already faces an operating deficit of over \$114,000 in fiscal year 2009. Less than 10 percent of total funding is used for administration and fundraising, allowing 90 percent of all funding to be channeled to direct client services. Because of this streamlined approach, it is not possible to absorb a reduction in State funding without an impact on direct services.

Pine Tree has voluntarily chosen to subject its operations to the highest possible standards in order to provide assurance that funding will be used carefully and effectively. Pine Tree is only one of six Maine nonprofits to have been certified by the Better Business Bureau as meeting their charitable accountability standards. Its comprehensive audits are completed each year without any material deficiencies or significant findings. Its major federal funder, the Legal Services Corporation, has recognized that Pine Tree is one of the most effective legal aid providers in the country.

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.

Every dollar of State funding is used carefully by Pine Tree's dedicated staff in providing some form of legal assistance to as many individuals as possible, given limited resources. As a result, Pine Tree's small staff expects to complete work on more than 12,000 requests for legal help in 2009, affecting an estimated 30,000 low-income Mainers. A recent evaluation by Pine Tree's major federal funder found that, "...PTLA...ranked tenth among legal services programs in the number of cases closed per 10,000 poor people even though it ranked 55th in total funding."

State funding is also essential in maintaining staff and offices in rural Maine, where it has proved harder to get private funds or special grants for program services. Pine Tree remains the only legal aid provider in Maine with local attorneys in Aroostook, Washington, and York Counties, areas of Maine where the need for legal assistance is especially high. Pine Tree staff resolve most problems through simple advice, a quick explanation of the law, or negotiation to avoid a protracted and expensive lawsuit. However, when Pine Tree does go to court, it wins nine cases out of ten.

Legal assistance has been especially effective in helping low-income Maine residents in the following areas, all of which depend in part on State funding support:

- an estimated 450 Maine households who are at risk of foreclosure and will contact Pine Tree seeking help in the coming year;
- an estimated 300 Maine households who will need legal advice about job loss, wages or other terms and conditions of employment;
- an estimated 60 low-income children whose need for health services can be reduced or eliminated by using legal services to tackle an underlying social or environmental problem;

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

Finally, state funding helps Pine Tree ensure that all Maine residents have a better understanding of the laws and programs designed to assist them, through an online library of more than 70 detailed legal education pamphlets, complete with interactive forms and other self-help tools at <http://www.ptla.org>. The Pine Tree website, a companion clearinghouse at [www.helpmelaw.org](http://www.helpmelaw.org), and specialized websites for volunteer attorneys ([www.vlp.org](http://www.vlp.org)) and low-income children ([www.kidslegal.org](http://www.kidslegal.org)) provide "one stop" access to local, state and federal laws important to Maine residents and are viewed literally thousands of times each week. Nationally recognized for the quality and level of information provided to visitors, a Google search for "legal assistance" consistently includes the Pine Tree website in its top ten listings.