



Maine Equal Justice
People Policy Solutions

ESSENTIAL JUSTICE

2026



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This year continues to bring deep uncertainty for many Maine families.

Rising costs, harmful federal policies, and economic instability make many basics unaffordable, and accessing support quickly is more important than ever. For communities with low income who we work alongside, these barriers are not new, but the share of people who feel unstable is greater.

But, even in unstable times, families can and should be able to thrive.

We know peoples' ability to meet their basic needs is not random or inevitable; it is shaped by policy choices and the systems we build. Too often, those choices have created systems that work for the wealthy and powerful instead of the rest of us. We believe that everyone deserves the essentials they need not just to survive, but to thrive.

This legislative session, together with other organizations and Maine renters, we secured \$11 million for Maine's Eviction Prevention Program, which will help families stay in their homes amid rising rents. We also helped win new funding for civil legal aid, which strengthens access to justice for thousands more Mainers.

In Augusta, our Equal Justice Partners' Circle and policy team kept up the rally cry for tax fairness and long-term investments in Maine communities. We're excited to see the results of their hard work, with policies like the increased tax on millionaires becoming law. There's a basic fairness to ensuring those who have benefited the most contribute more so everyone can access the essentials we all deserve. And at a time of urgent need, MEJ advocates in Augusta pushed for Maine to use available rainy day funds to help communities now, rather than leaving families struggling.

In this newsletter, you'll read more about the policy victories, legal advocacy, organizing efforts, and community leadership driving MEJ's work across Maine, and about the people continuing to show up through difficult times.

As we move into election season, economic justice matters deeply. We will continue shaping public conversation through education, outreach, and organizing so people with low income have more opportunities and timely information to engage in the democratic process.

At a time when too many systems are failing people, we need leaders who understand what communities across Maine are facing, and who are willing to advance policies rooted in dignity, fairness, and opportunity. Many people feel deeply disillusioned with government for good reason. But change is possible when communities have power and a real voice in the decisions that affect their lives. Government should work for, by, and with our communities, with people most impacted by inequity shaping the solutions.

Change only happens when people organize and show up for one another - thank you for helping build a Maine where everyone can thrive.



In solidarity,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Robyn Merrill".

Robyn Merrill, *Executive Director*

OUR IMPACT TOGETHER



[Seeing the Eviction Prevention Program voted into the budget] confirmed again for me that we do have power, that we can fight back, we can make sure that if you live in Maine, you have a roof over your head, food on the table, and can go to the doctor.

I never thought it would be in the midst of national turmoil that Maine found its bravery, but that is what I saw this year. And instead of contemplating the complexities of celebrating baby steps towards justice—this year, I am basking in the glimpses of hope, humanity, boldness and bravery.

- Allina Diaz, Community Organizing Director and Leadership Coach

\$11M

in funding for the Eviction Prevention Program (rent relief) secured by MEJ and Maine renters in 2026.

93%

of MEJ cases representing immigrants facing eviction resulted in a positive outcome for clients.

1,308

people supported by Peer Workforce Navigators to access work, education, training, and unemployment assistance in 2025.

289

people attended MEJ trainings in 2025, including people with low income and staff from social service agencies and health centers.

Policy advocates testified on

85

bills during the 132nd legislature.

MEJ provided direct legal assistance in

919

cases in 2025, impacting 1271 people residing throughout the state.

\$2.9M

distributed to nearly 1800 children and their families through our recently-concluded Build HOPE Project (2022-2025).

LEGISLATIVE SESSION IN REVIEW

We entered the 2025 legislative session with priorities shaped by our Leadership Teams, the Equal Justice Partner Circle, Peer Workforce Navigator Project participants, clients, and partners across Maine. While harmful Trump administration policies created challenges, we worked with legislative champions to secure key budget investments and advance important laws.

HOUSING

Rent relief funded

Though Maine families continue to see impossibly high rents, we were thrilled to see \$11 million included in the budget to continue the Eviction Prevention Program (EPP) in 2026 and 2027.

Housing is the foundation for opportunity, stability, and belonging, and we've championed the EPP as a critical tool to keep people housed. The EPP helps renters facing eviction stay in their homes and communities, while avoiding the far greater costs of homelessness and emergency services.

We expect the EPP to reopen in August – stay tuned for updates as we learn more details.



IMMIGRANT ACCESS

Defended immigrants' rights and protected access to SNAP

Mainers who are immigrants have been especially harmed under policies promoted by the Trump administration. In addition to cutting eligibility to public benefit programs

like SNAP and Medicaid, actions by ICE have made it unsafe for some Mainers to go to work and school.

At the Legislature, we supported a bill to create guardrails around ICE and backed a bill strengthening Maine's state-funded SNAP program, ensuring immigrants losing federal food assistance can still access support.



FOOD SECURITY

SNAP "Contingency Fund" created

Last fall, many Mainers who rely on SNAP faced real hardship when a federal shutdown under the Trump administration delayed food support. Though the benefits were eventually released, the disruption made clear how quickly this critical support can break down.

MEJ worked with supportive policymakers to strengthen Maine's response. This year's budget includes a SNAP Contingency Fund, which gives the state the flexibility to provide up to one month of benefits if the federal government fails to meet its obligations to SNAP participants once again.

HEALTH CARE

Braced for federal cuts

We continue to talk with policymakers about the ways H.R.1 (passed by Congress last July) will hurt access to healthcare in Maine.

People who get coverage through the ACA Marketplace are already seeing higher costs and fewer options, while others risk losing coverage later this year or in January 2027. These losses will put more financial strain on health care providers, increasing the risk of further service reductions and closures across Maine. We are also concerned that racist rhetoric about fraud could jeopardize funding for vital home- and community-based services.

In this year's budget, lawmakers invested in staffing, technology, and the MaineCare Stabilization Fund.

MEJ will continue fighting to protect health care and to minimize the damage of federal policy changes.

INCOME SOLUTIONS

Targeted financial support

We worked alongside a broad coalition of partners to help lawmakers understand why flexible financial support is so important for people with the lowest incomes.

Legislators delivered progress in the budget by strengthening the Property Tax Fairness Credit (PTFC) and by directing Governor Mills' proposed \$300 affordability payments to the households that need them most. To receive either the PTFC or the \$300 payment, eligible Mainers must file a 2025 state tax return.

TAX FAIRNESS

Millionaire's tax passed

The Appropriations Committee funded many vital policies using a portion of the state Budget



Stabilization Fund ("rainy day fund") and by including an important revenue policy – a millionaire's tax. This 2% surcharge on the portion of taxable income above \$1 million for single filers and \$1.5 million for joint filers helps make our tax system more progressive. By asking those with the most to pay their fair share, we have more revenue available to fund essential programs and needs for Mainers who are struggling.

This policy is a huge win for the Mainers for Tax Fairness coalition, of which MEJ is proud to be a member.



CIVIL LEGAL AID

Legal aid funding secured

Maine's civil legal aid network serves people with low incomes, immigrants, older adults, and people with disabilities across the state. The state budget includes \$2 million in ongoing funding and \$3 million in one-time funding to expand this support.

More Mainers will now have access to legal advice and representation in court for issues like eviction, family and employment matters, immigration, and public benefits through organizations such as MEJ, Pine Tree Legal Assistance, and ILAP.

RACIAL EQUITY

Supported tribal sovereignty

As a member of the Wabanaki Alliance, MEJ is glad to see some smaller legislative wins achieved again this year, but we continue to stand with the Wabanaki Nations and for full tribal sovereignty.

Ensuring the Wabanaki Nations have self-determination is a critical step in promoting equity and addressing the harms of policies rooted in racism.

MEJ MILESTONES

1996

Opportunity born from crisis: Maine Equal Justice founded

After Congress guts welfare and adds restrictions to civil legal aid, MEJ is created by legal leaders to fill advocacy gaps.

1996-1997

MEJ reshapes welfare reform

MEJ statewide listening tours inform state solutions. Parents as Scholars is created, immigrants' vital assistance is protected, and Maine rejects the harshest parts of federal welfare 'reform'.

2000-2002

MaineCare expansion (part 1)

Pre-Affordable Care Act, Maine leads on health care by covering parents and adults without kids under MaineCare, while children gain better access to services through the *Risinger* case.

2007

Competitive Skills Scholarship Program (CSSP) created

Adults with low incomes, not just parents, get expanded access to college and career training.

2009

Thousands more families qualify for food assistance

Administrative advocacy secures categorical eligibility for SNAP, helping thousands more families qualify while simplifying access.

MAINE EQUAL JUSTICE TURNS 30

Thirty years ago, as federal welfare reform transformed the nation's safety net, Mary Henderson and Christine Hastedt set out to build a different future for Maine, one where people experiencing poverty could help shape the decisions affecting their lives, and where families could find more opportunity and security.

Federal policies of the 1990s limited public assistance and pushed people into jobs quickly, often without considering whether those jobs offered long-term stability or opportunities for advancement. At the same time, new restrictions made it harder for legal aid organizations to advocate for broad policy change.

Working alongside Mainers with lived experience, Maine Equal Justice helped create one of the strongest Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) programs in the country. We championed policies that treated education, job training, and family supports as essential pathways to economic security.



1996: Maine Equal Justice founded

This year, Maine Equal Justice celebrates its 30th anniversary.

Over decades, it's easier to measure the differences: to health care, food security, income support, housing support. Year by year, change builds slowly, painfully so for Maine people with urgent needs. But, watching carefully, you can see the moments where change happens, and we've been privileged to be there for quite a few.

Sometimes change happens in a crowded legislative hearing room, where the air is quiet and stuffy, with



2017-2018: MaineCare expansion (part 2)

2011-2015

We are Maine: Access to benefits defended

MEJ and partners successfully defend General Assistance, food assistance, and other income supports for immigrants despite significant efforts to roll them back.

2016

EJPC: people closest to the issues lead the way

The Equal Justice Partners' Circle launches. Community leaders across Maine who know poverty from the inside out gather with MEJ to shape policy, organize for change, and hold decision-makers accountable.

people filling rows and rows of chairs and state lawmakers around a horseshoe. It's a moment where everyone looks up, and leans in to hear the testimony brought by a Mainer who has lived through something hard, who connects their experience to their neighbors and to the bigger issue at stake.

Or, in a room full of Equal Justice Partners' Circle members, it's someone sharing their story about eviction and rental discrimination. There are nods, murmurs. Others have similar experiences or know folks who do. The group comes up with the kernel of an idea that, in three years, will be funded as the Eviction Prevention Program, saving thousands of families from losing their homes.



2011-2015: We are Maine

We wish we could count exactly how many moments of change Maine Equal Justice has been privileged to be part of in the last 30 years. We remain grateful for the opportunity to do this work and proud of what Mainers have accomplished together.



2022: Dental care is health care

2017-2018

MaineCare expansion (part 2)

MEJ helps galvanize public support for Medicaid expansion through a successful statewide ballot question, and later sues to ensure the new law is followed. 88,000 more adults in Maine gain affordable health care.

2018

Higher Pathways to Opportunity (HOPE)

MEJ helps create a statewide program for Mainers with low income to earn post-secondary degrees, secure better-paying jobs, and build long-term economic security.

2021-2025

Peer Workforce Navigator (PWN) Project

Out of pandemic experiences, MEJ co-founds a community-based model to connect workers to jobs, unemployment benefits, education, and essential supports. PWN is nationally recognized.

2026 and on

Steadfast and grounded

Thirty years on, MEJ keeps bringing law, policy, and lived experience together to make Maine a place where everyone has economic security and opportunities to thrive.

2024-2026

Rent relief keeps families housed

MEJ and the EJPC organize to establish and fund the Eviction Prevention Program, supporting Mainers with skyrocketing rents.

2022-2025

Build HOPE invests in students

MEJ distributes \$2.9 million in educational support, helping 800+ students with low income afford to finish college.

2022

Dental care is health care!

MEJ and coalition partners win MaineCare dental coverage for approximately 400,000 adults.

A DAY AT THE PEER WORKFORCE NAVIGATOR CLINIC

On Thursday mornings in Portland, the waiting room at ProsperityME fills quickly.

Some people carry resumes and layoff notices. Others arrive with questions about unemployment benefits, housing, or how to find work in a new country. In the corner, homemade African donuts sit beside coffee, while families wait to meet with a Peer Workforce Navigator.

For many immigrant and refugee workers in Maine, losing a job can mean far more than lost income. Language barriers, unfamiliar systems, and limited access to transportation or legal support can make recovery feel impossible. The Peer Workforce Navigator (PWN) project has helped to change that.

Established in 2022 through a partnership with the Maine Department of Labor, the PWN network connects trusted community organizations with workers who face barriers to employment and workforce services. The model grew quickly after a major Southern Maine layoff impacted nearly 1,000 immigrant workers more than three years ago. One Navigator began receiving calls from affected workers looking for help. The network quickly

organized a community meeting and nearly 200 people showed up.

That response evolved into Portland's Job Seeker Clinic, now held every week at ProsperityME. There, Navigators help one-on-one with job searches, resume writing, unemployment claims, and education and training opportunities. Services are offered in multiple languages and grounded in cultural familiarity and trust.

Because the clinic is hosted at ProsperityME, visitors can also connect to housing navigation, financial literacy programs,

scholarship support, and LIHEAP assistance. Legal Services staff regularly provide walk-in help with eviction prevention and public benefits, and include partners like the Maine CareerCenter, Portland Adult Education, Goodwill Workforce Solutions, and local employers.

Today, the PWN network has expanded to include bi-weekly clinics in Lewiston and monthly resource fairs in Bangor. Across Maine, the project continues to demonstrate that workforce development works best when people are welcomed not just as job seekers, but as neighbors.



NEED HELP WITH SNAP, MAINECARE OR OTHER PROGRAMS?

We have lots of information on our website about SNAP, MaineCare, General Assistance, and other programs that help meet basic needs.

Some recent topics:

- Immigrant Eligibility for SNAP
- SNAP for Older Adults and People with Disabilities
- I am an Immigrant, Should I Still use MaineCare?

Scan to browse
our library of
information:

or go to:
bit.ly/mej-help



If you have been told that you can't get benefits, but you think that you should qualify, contact us for help: maineequaljustice.org/contact-us/

WELCOME NEW STAFF!



Susan Kiralis
Community
Organizer

Susan has long been involved in advocacy surrounding reparation dialogue, TANF, housing justice, access to education, and cultural preservation. Her passions are community gardens, independent film festival organizing, and traditional Afro-Indigenous medicine making. Her favorite place on earth is Cerro, where she feels most connected to nature and home.

LEGAL SERVICES

Whether responding to disruptions in food assistance, representing a renter facing eviction, or helping Mainers secure another kind of support they're entitled to under the law, our team combines legal expertise with a deep commitment to dignity and fairness.

In the last year, Maine Equal Justice's legal services team worked on 919 cases, helping families across Maine protect their income, keep their homes, access essential benefits, and navigate some of the most difficult moments of their lives. Our team supported 150+ immigrant families experiencing housing insecurity, in partnership with Presente! Maine and ProsperityME.

With support from our legal team and representation from the Volunteer

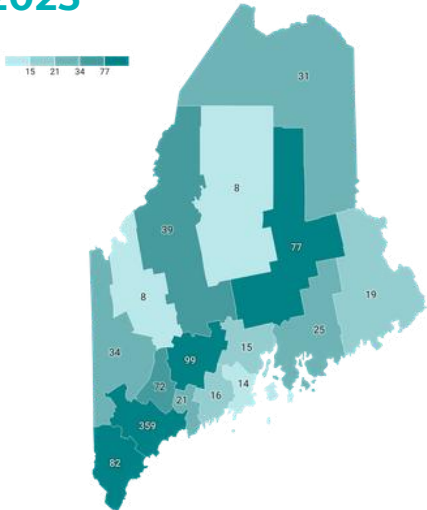
Lawyers' Project, Nedra Smith from Dover Foxcroft won her unemployment insurance appeal. She sent this note:

"I'm so proud of myself for the fight I put into it and just wanted to thank you all for helping me keep my family safe. This allows me to keep my car, keep everything functioning through the summer and complete my degree. I appreciate more than you know having you all in my corner through this incredibly difficult experience. I am so relieved I feel like I can breathe for the first time in many months."

Members of the MEJ legal team stand beside Mainers as they navigate

complex systems and advocate for a more stable future. Every case is more than a legal problem solved—it is a family moving forward with greater security and hope, knowing they did not have to face hardship alone.

LEGAL SERVICES CASES BY COUNTY, 2025

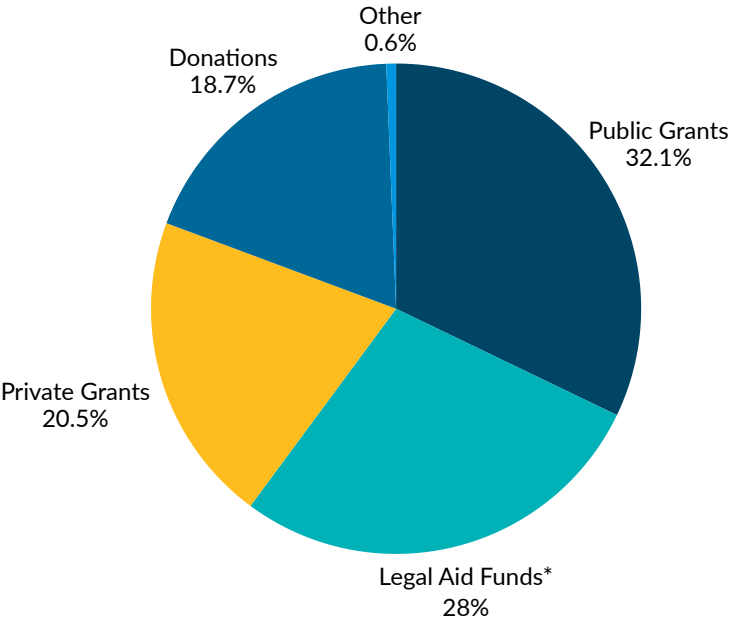


OUR BUDGET (2025)

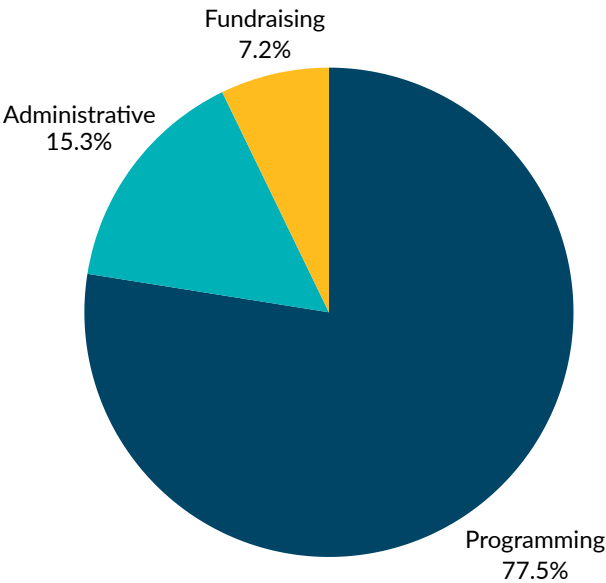
Our support from individual donations is stronger than ever, and the state of Maine is stepping up investments in civil legal aid providers like Maine Equal Justice.

In 2025 we also began a new grant from the Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) to support our eviction legal services work in partnership with Presente! Maine and ProsperityME. While this funding will end in the next year, we're actively raising funds to continue that housing work and maintain legal services staffing.

REVENUE: \$3.78 MILLION



EXPENSES: \$3.20 MILLION



*Funding from the Maine Civil Legal Services Fund and Interest on Lawyers Trust Accounts (IOLTA)

CELEBRATING 10 YEARS OF THE EJPC

Our first Partners' Circle convened in May 2016, when twenty-three community leaders came together for a common purpose: ending poverty and ensuring all people in Maine have the opportunity to live with dignity.

This year marks the 10th anniversary of the Equal Justice Partners Circle (EJPC)! Over the last decade, we have celebrated many wins and built a community that is strong, informed, and inspired. Without the work we have done together over these years, from listening sessions, to rallies at the legislature, we would not be as prepared as we are to meet the challenges of today.

Mainers with low income face deep uncertainty. They are enduring the pain of broken safety nets and a rise in harmful rhetoric. Yet, because of what we have built together, organizers and volunteers alike find hope in our collective power.

The vision for the EJPC is fully alive: we are an active movement of community members, advocates, and allies who have found common ground in fighting for a Maine where everyone has what they need and is treated with dignity.



Over the next several months, our Housing and Aspire Leadership teams will develop 2027 campaigns rooted in community feedback and pressing economic issues, like the soaring cost of housing. We invite you to join our efforts!

Recognizing the 10-year milestone is so important. While it's easy to focus on how far we have to go, looking back is incredibly rewarding. We are proud of our community, and the members who over these years have raised children, earned degrees, worked hard, and reclaimed their dignity, while staying committed to change despite (and often because of) the challenges they have faced.

Together, we claim ten years of community-led campaigns, enduring friendships, and a space that feels like home.



INTERESTED IN JOINING THE EJPC?

If you are new to the EJPC, you can nominate yourself or someone you know, and we will follow up with more information about our upcoming events.

NOMINATION FORM:

Scan to nominate:

or go to:
bit.ly/ejpc-nom26

UPCOMING EVENTS:

Aug 5

EJPC 101
10 am - 1:30 pm (Virtual)

Aug 18

Summer Convening
9 am - 4 pm (In person)



OUR SUPPORTERS HELP MAKE MAINE EQUAL JUSTICE'S WORK POSSIBLE

Our community's contributions of time, energy, expertise, and money make our work across Maine, the State House, and courthouses possible. Thank you. Together, we've accomplished a lot, but the challenges ahead are immense. Attacks on health care, food assistance, and low-income and immigrant Mainers will continue—and we need you with us for every step.

Recurring gifts of \$5, \$10, or \$30 help us respond to urgent needs while advancing our vision of a Maine where everyone has what they need.

Currently, we have 63 supporters who give monthly to stay connected and sustain our work.

We hope to welcome 10 new monthly supporters this summer - can you be one? If a one-time gift works best, we're grateful for your support in any way.

Thank you!

Scan to donate:



or go to:
bit.ly/mej-donate-26



Maine Equal Justice

People Policy Solutions

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