

Pine Tree Legal Assistance Report to the Coffin Advisory Committee Fall 2025

In September of 1998, the Coffin Family Law Fellowship was launched at Pine Tree Legal Assistance with the financial support of Portland's largest law firms. These Fellows are recent law graduates who are gaining the opportunity to work in public service. Many have gone on to distinguished careers in the law. They include a current Maine Family Law Magistrate, the Interim Chief Counsel of the ABA's Commission on Domestic & Sexual Violence, and the head of the Family Division of Maine's Administrative Office of the Courts, as well as attorneys who are actively engaged in private practice or various forms of public service. Many of the previous Fellows still live in Maine.

To date, the Coffin Fellows have worked on a remarkable 2,277 cases on behalf of low-income individuals in Cumberland County who had no other legal aid resources available to them. All of these cases reflect situations where legal counsel for the client was essential to move the case forward: cases where the other side has counsel, cases where our client is the victim of the other party's violence, minor children are involved in the proceeding, the client has limited English proficiency, or the client has significant mental health issues or other disabilities.

Update on the current Coffin Fellows

Senior Fellow Haley Brazier received her B.A. in Anthropology and French from the University of Vermont followed by a J.D. from Maine Law and was sworn in to the Maine Bar in October 2024. A few weeks into her Coffin fellowship in the fall of 2024, Haley attended a four-day National Institute for Trial Advocacy training alongside PTLA colleagues. During the training she continued to sharpen and develop her trial skills. A year into her Coffin Fellowship, Haley has had several final hearings in divorces, parental rights & responsibilities, and protection from abuse cases. A few of these cases were built off the hard work of previous Fellows and led to great outcomes for her clients, such as large-sum spousal support awards and a client's ability to relocate out-of-state with her children.

Junior Coffin Fellow Georgia Whitaker first came to Maine to attend Bowdoin College. She received a PhD in history from Harvard and attended NYU for law school, graduating in 2024. In law school, Georgia gained experience in family law through clinical and internship work involving survivors of domestic violence and sexual assault, Special Immigrant Juvenile Status petitions, and parental rights issues. She was a remote extern in Pine Tree's Bangor office during her second year of law school. After graduation, Georgia was a law clerk for United States District Judge John A. Woodcock, Jr. of the District of Maine and was sworn into the Maine Bar in 2024. She is extremely grateful to have returned to Pine Tree as a Coffin Fellow.

Cases handled to date

From September 1, 2024 through August 31, 2025, the Coffin Fellows worked on 126 cases. One hundred five of these were new matters. They continued to work on 21 cases that had already been accepted for representation. Of the matters completed during this period, 60 cases (55%) involved extended representation and, significantly, all resulted in a favorable

outcome for the client. In 49 cases the Fellows provided clients with advice or limited representation.

Client stories

The following stories are cases that Coffin Fellows handled in the past twelve months and demonstrate both the challenges faced by Coffin Fellowship clients and the difference that effective representation can make in the outcome of a client's case.

Obtaining protection from abuse (PFA) orders is a proven means to lessen immediate and long-term harm to survivors of abuse. PTLA attorneys, including Coffin Fellows, provide free legal representation to survivors in PFA cases, coordinating services with sexual assault and domestic violence agencies and providing holistic services to clients. In the past year, our Coffin Fellows helped survivors obtain 44 PFAs. One such case illustrates the positive outcomes that can be obtained.

A client was referred to us by Through These Doors. Our Coffin Fellow met with the survivor to learn about their goals and the abuse they had experienced in their relationship. She represented the client at the final court hearing and negotiated with the opposing party to reach an agreement on the client's behalf. The agreement awarded the client possession of their shared home, possession of a shared dog, and ordered no contact, among other prohibitions. After the judge issued the final order, the Fellow also conducted research and advised the client on their legal rights regarding early lease termination and waiver of financial penalties in light of the abuse she had endured. Based on this advice, the client was in a better position to negotiate their lease termination with their landlord, which saved her money and allowed her to move to a new space of her own.

PTLA's Family Law and Victim Rights Unit handles other family law issues including divorce and custody cases, which have much longer timeframes. Coffin Fellowship cases often demonstrate the extent to which legal representation makes positive outcomes possible for low-income individuals threatened with the loss of their homes, their income and -- most importantly -- their children as a result of a family breakup or other family issues. Two successive Coffin Fellows handled the following case, an example of the impact of legal representation.

Our client was going through a contested divorce. She is the sole caregiver for the couple's two sons, both of whom are non-verbal and autistic. Her husband had relinquished all claims to, and interest in, his children and was hiding his assets, and lying about them, throughout the divorce proceedings. This made it extremely difficult for our client and attorneys to determine what an equitable divorce would look like. A prior Coffin Fellow took the case and through perseverance and skill gained access to his paystubs, retirement and VA benefits, and mortgage details. Another Coffin Fellow then took the case and, armed with this information, represented the client at trial and was able to impeach the husband when he inaccurately testified about his assets. The court found the financial evidence compelling and our client was awarded compensation for her share of the finances to which she had no access during the marriage, as well as \$50,000 from the sale of the house. Because of the work of our Coffin Fellows, she and

her children can start fresh on better economic footing, free of the abuse and control of her ex-husband.

Pine Tree's Family Law and Victim Rights Unit provides the Fellows training, mentorship, and support throughout their Fellowship. As new attorneys, the Fellows are learning the legal aspects of a case, how to be an attorney, and how to navigate emotionally difficult cases so they can manage their work effectively.

The quality of their legal work and the life-changing outcomes for clients remain consistent with the original vision of the Coffin Fellowship founders. Pine Tree Legal Assistance is honored to serve as the host site for this innovative and important fellowship program, which is a national model for private firm support of pro bono service.

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