Why attend a public hearing at the legislature?

The Maine State Legislature takes up issues that impact our daily lives – from health care to housing to discrimination. Legislators hear a lot from people who are hired to work as lobbyists. Paid lobbyists work to persuade legislators to support or oppose bills based on the interests of their employers, often those with resources and power. Legislators don’t hear enough from their constituents who care about passing laws and policies to improve the lives of people struggling to get by.

Everyday people sharing their stories is often the most effective way to influence policy decisions.

You can make a difference! Policymakers need to hear from you when making decisions that will impact your life. Sharing your story and experience can help policymakers make better, more informed decisions. And this helps all of us!

Testifying at a public hearing can feel intimidating at first. You’re not alone – we’ll be there with you! The good news is that most people are glad they did it after they testify at a public hearing. Using your voice to share your story, express your beliefs, and influence change can be empowering and powerful.

This short guide will walk you through everything you need to prepare for the hearing.
What to know before the hearing:

- Public Hearing Date & Time
- Committee Name
- Committee Location
- Bill Number (known as the “LD number” short for “Legislative Document”)

Where to find this information:

Maine Equal Justice will post about upcoming hearings on our Facebook page (under the ‘events’ tab) and on our website.

For committee information, follow this link:
http://legislature.maine.gov/house/house/Committees

To search for a bill, and look at the text of the legislation or learn which committee is considering it, follow this link:
https://legislature.maine.gov/LawMakerWeb/search.asp

If you don’t know the “LD” (or legislative document) number of a bill, you can look up bills by their lead sponsor (the name of the legislator who submitted the bill) or you can reach out to the MEJ Community Organizer, Ambureen Rana, at arana@mejp.org.

Directions to Committee Rooms: You can find directions by calling the Capitol info line at (800) 301-3178. Some committee rooms can be found in the State House building location located at 100 State House Station Augusta, Maine. Other committees can be found just next door in the Cross Office Building at 111 Sewall St. Augusta.

Parking Directions: Free parking is in the parking garage on the corner of Sewall St. and Capitol St. You can also find parking just outside the Cross Office Building.

What is a public hearing?

A legislative public hearing is one step in the process of a bill becoming a law. A legislative committee such as the Health and Human Services Committee, a group of Maine Senators and Representatives, will listen to testimony from both sides of an issue. Testimony becomes part of the public record and can be found online.
Goals of the public hearing:

- To persuade the legislative committee to vote a certain way on a bill (a unanimous committee vote can send a strong message to the full legislature).
- To lay out the case for or against a policy proposal and build support for your position over time.
- To educate lawmakers and the public on the relevant facts and the realities of peoples’ lives.
- To open peoples’ hearts and minds to other peoples’ needs, suffering, strengths, and resiliencies.

THE DAY OF THE PUBLIC HEARING – WHAT TO EXPECT

- Arrive at the hearing early enough to secure a seat, usually at least 30 minutes ahead of the scheduled start.
- There will likely be a sign-up sheet to speak, and you’ll want to add your name to the list. Make sure you sign up early if you have limited time.
- If the hearing room is full, there will be an “overflow room” down the hall where you can listen in and come in when it’s your turn to speak.
- Prepare for a 3-minute clock and time limit when there is a large crowd.
- The Committee Chair(s) will start the hearing by calling everything to order. Sponsoring legislators begin by making their case for their bill. Those in support often go first, followed by those in opposition.

What to prepare:

You’ll want to type up testimony before the hearing and print out 20 copies. At the hearing, you don’t need to read exactly what you write. You will have 3 minutes to speak, but there is no limit on the length of written testimony that you submit. If you can’t get access to a printer and are testifying on a bill we’re working to support, Maine Equal Justice can assist you in printing your testimony if you send it to us in advance of the hearing.

When it’s your turn to speak:

Before you approach the podium, you’ll want to hand over your 20 copies of testimony to the Clerk (you’ll see other people do this before you). Then you can go up to the podium and introduce yourself like this: “Senator _______, Representative ________, and honorable members of the Joint Standing...”
Committee on ___________: my name is ____, I am a resident of ____ and I am here today to testify in favor of/opposition to LD ______.

Then you share your testimony. There will be a clock running in front of you, and you'll get a gentle reminder when three minutes is up. After you’re finished, you can offer to answer questions if you’re comfortable. Committee members will have the chance to ask clarifying questions. It’s always OK to say you don’t know the answer. You can offer to get the committee the information later. Maine Equal Justice can help you do this.

Here’s an example of how testimony can be structured:

1. **Introduction**: “Senator______, Representative ________, and honorable members of the Joint Standing Committee on ______________: my name is ____, I am a resident of ____ and I am here today to testify in favor of LD______.”

2. **Key messages**: Pick one or two reasons why legislators should support or oppose this bill -- just one sentence on each.

3. **Story**: Tell a personal story or share an experience that illustrates your main point.

4. **Closing**: Briefly summarize your main message and thank the committee.

These are the important things to remember:

1. The best way to get your point across is to **share your story**. The committee will hear plenty of facts and figures from policy and legal “experts”. We need to show them the human impact of this policy.

2. You have **three minutes to speak**, and the time goes by fast! You probably only have time to say your key message and tell a story to illustrate your point.
3. **You are making a difference!** It’s the job of the legislature – and all of us - to make sure we realize economic, racial and gender justice in Maine. In the words of Frederick Douglass: “Power concedes nothing without demand.” As residents of Maine, we must petition our government to meet the needs of our people. Your voice matters.

**We’ll Be There to Support You**

Learn more about Maine Equal Justice’s priority bills for this session. If you sign up to testify, we will be there every step of the way! We will help you find the key messages and supporting arguments to compose your testimony. We’ll be there with you in the committee room during the public hearing and keep you in the loop about the outcome of the bill and next steps.

Thank you for your advocacy—together, we’re building a more just Maine!