

House Committee on the Judiciary

Testimony in Support of HB 2329

Testimony of Jorge Lara, Oregon Law Center

March 26, 2015

Chair Barker, members of the Committee, my name is Jorge Lara. I am the managing attorney of the Salem office that is located 1655 State Street, just a few blocks from this building. Thank you for the honor of allowing me to testify briefly in support of HB 2329.

I was raised across the river in Independence, Oregon. My parents, family and relatives were migrant farmworkers who came here from Texas in the 1960s and settled over at the Green Villa Farms. My grandfather chose this valley as our permanent home because of our wonderful topsoil. It was a place everyone could work year round and the farm owner, Mr. Kennedy, was a good and decent employer who provided us with clean cabins to live in. Of utmost importance to grandfather was that the school bus from the Eola school over in West Salem would pick us kids up for school. After a few years at the Green Villa Farms my family saved enough money to move into the big city of Independence, Oregon where my mother still lives. I'm telling you this because I'd like you to know who I am, what's important to me, and why I appreciate your support for legal aid in Oregon.

I decided to become a lawyer after my grand-parents retained a local attorney in Monmouth, Oregon named Joe Penna. Joe doesn't know this, but as a boy he earned my lifelong respect for the way he treated my grand-parents. I would go to our appointments to interpret, and he always treated them as equals and let them know that the law protects everyone the same regardless of whether you are poor or rich. The courthouse is for everyone, and everyone is entitled to enter the courthouse doors.

I graduated from Central High in Independence. Later I attended the University of Oregon where I obtained both my undergraduate and law degrees. Go Ducks!

Working at legal aid and the Oregon Law Center is the only work I have done as a lawyer. I chose this career because I like my clients and because I believe they are entitled to high quality legal representation and I believe the courthouse doors are open to everyone.

Not long ago I represented a group of Spanish speaking clients who lived in a mobile home park whose septic system had broken down. The landlords had placed some portable toilets in the

park but my clients were fearful for their health due to the sewage leaks and also fearful of being evicted if they complained. In these types of cases, experienced legal aid lawyers know that there is also the danger that state and local authorities could close the park with little notice because there was a health hazard. Once a park is closed the revenue stream is lost and low-income people have to move. It is usually not possible to move older mobile homes.

Our office contacted the landlord and state and local agencies asking everyone to work together with us toward a common goal of keeping the park open while also improving the septic system. The landlord built a new septic system for the park. Like much of the work done by civil lawyers, the clients' goal and justice were achieved without filing a lawsuit. Monetary damages were not what my client's needed but a safe and clean septic system. They needed to keep their homes and keep that park open.

Every week I meet families living on the edge and frightened. Mothers who are having trouble getting their apartment stove, bathroom or other essential service repaired; disabled folks who need a disabled parking space because it is difficult to roll their wheelchair for long distances; clients who receive eviction notices because they have difficulty remembering to take their medication. I make a point to treat them with dignity and respect, just like Joe Penna treated my grandparents. Low-income people have more legal problems than the average person. Individuals who are frightened and poor need help understanding their rights and responsibilities under the rule of law. Even a little help can go a long way.

In many cases all that is needed is advice, a letter or a phone call to the landlord or property owner. I respectfully inform them of my client's circumstances, the applicable law, and the landlord's obligation to perform certain legal or contractual obligations. In a very high percentage of my cases this is all that is required to solve a conflict. The clients' lives improve. The laws you adopt are followed. Clients are grateful. Legal aid in Oregon provides direct services to about 20,000 individuals each year. We need to serve more. The hardest part of our jobs is when we have to turn away people who need a lawyer. Any additional revenue you provide through HB 2329 will be used to hire more staff to increase services to clients. In Salem alone, we need to refill three positions that were frozen and not yet rehired to get back to the 2011 staffing level, and then we need to add positions to address the significant increase in need caused when there was a 61.5% increase in the population that is eligible for our services.

Thank you for your time and attention for allowing me to speak a bit about a day in my life as a legal aid lawyer in Oregon. And thank you for your support in helping obtain access to justice for all Oregonians with limited income. I will answer any questions.