

## House Committee on the Judiciary

### Testimony in Support of HB 2329

#### Testimony of Martina Gordon, Oregon Law Center

March 26, 2015

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Chair Barker, members of the Committee, my name is Martina Gordon and I live in Pendleton, Oregon. I testify today as a client eligible board member of Oregon Law Center, one of the statewide legal aid programs. I was appointed to the board by the Salvation Army in Pendleton. The legal aid board is made up of lawyers appointed by state and local bar associations and client members appointed by community groups. We also have one certified public accountant on the board. Thank you for the honor of allowing me to testify in support of HB 2329.

I was born and raised on the Umatilla Indian Reservation and am a member of the Confederated Tribes of the Umatilla Indian Reservation. I am familiar with the challenges faced by low-income families and the elderly in this state because I am one of the 850,000 Oregonians who are eligible for legal aid. I am also familiar with the needs of low-income Oregonians because in my last job we helped distribute food to needy families and my current job I work for the Tribe's housing department. It is hard to get by when you have limited income. When something goes wrong, there is no cushion. A car that breaks down or medical bills can throw off the budget. Transportation is a barrier for low-income people living in rural Oregon. In Pendleton, people have to travel twenty miles just to apply for Section 8 housing. It used to be that you could just give someone \$5 for gas to get them to where they were going, but that is no longer enough.

Like many low-income individuals, I have faced challenges in my life. I grew up in a family that struggled with addiction to alcohol. By the time I was in high school, I was struggling with alcohol addiction myself. At one point, I decided that I was going to escape from addiction. It was clearly a good choice. It was hard work, but I did it. Through that process I learned something about my ability to set a goal and achieve it. I also learned how to be resilient.

When I married, I thought that things would go well, but this did not turn out to be the case. We had moved to Corvallis, and through a difficult divorce, I ended up without a home. When I went to a shelter to seek refuge, I was shocked to learn that they had no room. It never occurred to me that a shelter would turn you down. They just did not have space. I had to sleep in the car. It was frightening. Although I was homeless for a relatively short period of time, I will never forget what that felt like. I do not want that to happen to anyone.

I moved back to Pendleton to be closer to family and friends – to be with my tribe. That is when I first went to legal aid. Legal aid helped me get a divorce. I really like the legal aid office in Pendleton. It is located in this old house next to a church downtown. Kit and Aaron, the attorneys that helped me, were great. They treated me with dignity and respect. They helped me understand the law and helped me achieve my goals. It is remarkable what you can accomplish with a helping hand. I moved on to get a job and get a home. Later, we almost lost our home in Pendleton, but legal aid stepped in and helped us save our home. That was so important to me. I did not want to become homeless again. Legal aid gave me a voice when I did not have my own. Now that I found my voice, I want to use my voice in this room to help other low-income people. Please support HB 2329 so they can have access to justice and fairness.

When I asked my supervisor, for permission to come here to testify today, he told me to be certain to tell this committee that the Confederated Tribes of the Umatilla Indian Reservation support funding for legal aid because legal aid does a lot to help low-income people. He said that Kit and Aaron have done a great job assisting tribal members who are struggling with consumer problems. They have provided financial education classes since 2003. They help on old hospital bills, bad car deals, credit card disputes and other matters. They help on housing issues. They help on family law cases.

Legal aid can make a real difference for a client and help the client get on with life. The Pendleton office of legal aid made a big difference in my life by helping me with my divorce and helping me keep my home. This helped me create the kind of stability that I needed to get a job and be productive. I left work at 5 p.m. yesterday, and drove here to Salem, because I wanted to be here in person today to thank you for your past support of legal aid and ask you to support HB 2329. Thank you. I would be happy to answer questions.