

**Testimony in Support of
Oregon Law+Connect
to the Senate Interim Committee on Judiciary
and Ballot Measure 110 Implementation
January 12, 2022**

Chair Prozanski and members of the committee,

My name is Keren Farkas. I am the new Chief Access to Justice Officer and Director of the Legal Services Program at the Oregon State Bar. I joined the bar last fall after two years as the Parent Child Representation Program Manager at the Office of Public Defense Services. I am happy to join you today to discuss Oregon Law+Connect, a one-stop coordinated civil legal resource portal for Oregon.

Oregon Law+Connect: In the upcoming Legislative Session, the Oregon State Bar, with the assistance of the Oregon Judicial Department, and in partnership with Oregon's legal aid providers and Oregon Consumer Justice, will submit a funding request to the Oregon Legislature for approximately \$2.4 million dollars to develop a centralized and coordinated online civil legal access portal for all Oregonians. A centralized website, funded in part by the federal Legal Services Corporation and local nonprofit organizations, will consolidate existing Oregon Judicial Department, Oregon State Bar, and civil legal aid provider resources to seamlessly and effectively connect Oregonians with appropriate civil legal information and referrals. The initial focus will be on consumer, family, housing, and immigration law.

Oregon Law+Connect will fill the gaps between existing programs and services, and provide a single entry point for Oregonians to identify civil legal problems and obtain civil legal help. Oregon Law+Connect will provide:

- Up-to-date and accessible legal content available through a guided interactive system,
- Coordination, consolidation, and integration of legal information and services,
- Development and implementation of plain language legal information, translated into numerous languages (Chinese, English, Korean, Russian, Spanish, and Vietnamese) and low and no vision accessibility tools, and
- a centralized legal referral platform.

This portal will direct Oregonians to targeted legal assistance based on financial need, geographic location, legal issue, community/background, and other screening criteria.

Justice Gap: 84% of Oregonians with low incomes who experience a legal problem are unable to access legal help and historically underserved communities throughout the state have been disproportionately affected. Self-represented Oregonians may face significant challenges as they enter the legal system, including: linguistic and cultural inaccessibility, inability to connect with legal assistance, the use of legal jargon, or siloed resources.

Knowledge Gap: Further, many Oregonians may struggle with a knowledge gap, where people either do not seek legal assistance or information because they are unaware that a legal remedy exists, or do not know how or where to get legal assistance.

All of these challenges can create delays and confusion in our court system and stifle public confidence in the justice system.

Existing Resources: Currently, a variety of state, nonprofit, and bar resources provide civil legal resources. These programs include:

- Publication of court forms and court facilitator programs (Oregon Judicial Department),
- Lawyer Referral Services (Oregon State Bar),
- Legal representation for Individuals with Limited Means (Civil Legal Aid Providers),
- Publicly available legal information (Oregon Judicial Department, Oregon State Bar, and Oregon's civil legal aid providers), and
- Pro bono/volunteer efforts.

Each partner has created and delivered valuable resources and referral systems, however, there is no centralized access point or coordination. The current system does not provide Oregonians with an accessible, understandable, and navigable way to obtain the resources they need to address their essential civil legal needs.

With the creation of Oregon Law+Connect, Oregon will have one centralized primary online referral site for people with legal issues, incorporating existing resources and new content and services, while focusing on the needs of low-income and underserved communities. This coordinated and integrated approach will equip more Oregonians with the resources to navigate legal proceedings and, in turn, support the Courts' ability to efficiently handle cases involving self-represented Oregonians.

Thank you for the opportunity to speak with you today. I am happy to answer any questions you may have.

Sincerely,

Keren Farkas

Chief Access to Justice Officer
Director, Legal Services Program
Oregon State Bar