

LEGAL AID SERVICES OF OREGON, DOUGLAS COUNTY REGIONAL OFFICE

WRITTEN TESTIMONY TO APRIL 21 WAYS AND MEANS MEETING

ROSEBURG OREGON, by Joan-Marie Michelsen, Regional Director of the Douglas County Office of Legal Aid Services of Oregon.

Co-Chair Steiner, Co-Chair Sanchez, members, thank you for holding the hearing in Roseburg last night. Even though my name was not called, I was impressed at how many people were able to testify, and I appreciate the opportunity to do so in writing. I am Joan Marie Michelsen, and I have the privilege to be the regional director for Legal Aid Services of Oregon, Douglas County Office. Since graduating almost 30 years ago from the U of O Law School, I have had the pleasure of practicing exclusively in Southern Oregon's rural communities, first as a law clerk for the Klamath and Lake Judicial districts, then in private practice, and finally with legal aid. I had hoped to go to work for legal aid right out of law school, but the starting salary was so low I couldn't afford to. My time as a lawyer in S. Oregon regularly reinforces my belief that the presence of lawyers in rural and frontier counties is critical to maintaining Oregonians' safety, independence, family stability, and housing. It is easy to think of towns such as Roseburg as being rural, but when you have clients who spend over 2 hours getting to your office from one of the truly outlying areas it changes your perspective and reinforces the need to go to where people who need the help are.

Legal aid offices have approximately 130 lawyers and our excellent staff dedicated to serving low income people as well as seniors in every county in Oregon. We help people with a wide variety of legal issues, including housing, protection from abuse, maintaining or obtaining public benefits, family law, and discrimination related issues. In addition to several statewide task forces, we also have statewide units dedicated to helping farmworkers and Native peoples with their specialized needs. Each office has slightly different services based on the differences in local needs as determined by regular local priority-setting surveys. One of the many things we all share is our commitment to being welcoming and accessible to everyone. As it is important for people to speak with a lawyer in the language of their choice, we have many bilingual and multilingual staff members who provide services throughout the state. We also publish our public educational materials in English, Spanish, and sometimes additional languages.

Accessibility is also important for our physical offices. We stayed open for business during the pandemic, but it did change both how people prefer to contact us and how we could best respond. Although all the offices are now of course open for walk-in clients, many people still prefer to call, so we have expanded our phone access. We are also working with the Oregon State Bar and others to increase access through technology and the internet.

We all know how important maintaining housing is. Stable housing impacts every aspect of life, from employment to health and family stability. Legal aid works throughout the state to keep people housed. For example, our Eviction Defense Project (EDP), created in 2021 to respond to the pandemic housing crisis, has been fantastic. The EDP has helped over 10,000 households since its inception. It has also freed up local lawyers to take other types of cases. In my office, for example, we have been able to pivot one of our 3 full time lawyers towards other types of cases due to help from the EDP. But more important than numbers are the people that each number represents. Whether it is a domestic abuse survivor whose abuser is trying to evict her, or a large family who needs help paying the rent, it is exciting to help people keep stable housing.

Like with landlord tenant law, sometimes, helping with a family law case means full representation and going to court with someone. Sometimes, this means helping a person who is unable, perhaps due to language or disability related issues, to fill out a large packet of statewide court forms. And sometimes, it is as simple (for us) as explaining to someone why one form was rejected after they did all the rest of the process correctly on their own. All our levels of service can make a difference. But, like other lawyers in our program, I struggle with not being able to provide more help to more people. Unfortunately, given our current funding level, we are only able to help about 25% of the low-income clients who are eligible for our services. This impacts litigants in many ways. For example, we recently partnered with the VA in Roseburg to host a legal fair. We gave general presentations on various legal issues, including family law. One veteran in attendance was very vocal in his distress with the legal system and said that due to his wife having a lawyer, while he was unrepresented, he lost everything. This bad experience impacts him, his family, the courts, and of course the perceptions of everyone who comes in contact with him, or the many like him.

Legal aid offices do not stand alone. Because the demand for our help is so much higher than what we can provide, we also have specialty clinics and programs for lawyers in private practice who volunteer their time and expertise. In our office, for example, we have an ongoing partnership with the Portland based firm of Tonkon Torp LLP. They give us expert pro bono support and have taken several challenging cases for full representation when we were unable to do so. Also, every office has close partnerships with courts, other social service organizations, and governmental agencies. We work closely with our community partners, and we are often involved in collaborative problem solving and resource sharing.

I will close with a short example, of a case where we were able to help a man who would not have been able to access our services without the help of a community partner. A while back we were contacted about an elderly, bedridden, man who was working with a local agency. His abusive son wanted to take control of him and move him from the safe facility where he was happy and well cared for to one that was more convenient for the son. Our bedridden client did not want to go move and it would have been a painful process if he was forced to. The son also wanted to force his father to undergo invasive medical procedures that our client did not want. I was able to go see and represent him. At the end of the day, he was safe from the son, did not have to move, had his independence returned, and most importantly he got to spend his last days cared for and in peace among people he knew and liked. He was just one man, but every person has value and I know that as lawyers we can support people to get the help they need and deserve and move forward with their lives. But, I wish we could help more, and that is why I attended the hearing in Roseburg, and am submitting this testimony. Thank you for your consideration.