



Oregon Law Center

WORKING TOGETHER TO ACHIEVE JUSTICE FOR LOW INCOME OREGONIANS

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Testimony in Support of HB5012 Oregon Judicial Department Budget February 27, 2025

Co-Chair Broadman, Co-Chair Evans, and members of the Joint Subcommittee on Public Safety, my name is Erika Hente. I live in Eugene, and I am the executive director of the Oregon Law Center, one of Oregon's three legal aid organizations. Thank you for the opportunity to testify today in support of HB 5012, which includes support for legal aid funding, and policy option package #130 with \$4.35 million of additional funding for legal aid.

Legal Aid's mission is to achieve justice for the low-income communities of Oregon by providing a full range of the highest quality civil legal services. Oregon Law Center, Legal Aid Services of Oregon, and Center for Nonprofit Legal Services in Jackson County, work cooperatively to provide free civil legal assistance to low-income clients across the state. We have offices in 18 communities, and we serve clients in all 36 Oregon counties. We prioritize legal issues that protect people's livelihoods, health and safety, and family stability.

In 2023, legal aid served over 27,000 low-income individuals directly. Our work helped clients retain housing, obtain restraining orders when necessary to keep themselves and their families safe, and maintain public benefits such as medical care, food stamps and disability benefits. We also helped clients obtain unemployment benefits and represented clients in employment cases where clients had been subjected to illegal employment practices.

With our current staffing levels, there are less than 2 attorneys per 10,000 eligible Oregonians. This means that we must turn down many eligible individuals with qualifying legal needs because we do not have the capacity to serve them.

The legal aid system has over 80 different sources of funding, and the funding provided by the Oregon Legislature is our largest single source at 29%. The requested amount in the OJD budget does not keep pace with our increased costs. The requested additional \$4.35 million in POP #130 would allow us to meet our increased costs and address the salaries of our staff that are not keeping pace with cost of living and inflation. Currently our starting attorney salary is approximately \$20,000 less than the starting salary of a public defender. Hiring and retaining well trained staff is essential to providing high quality legal services to low-income Oregonians.

If we were to receive less than the budgeted amount, we would have to consider reducing staff in offices that are already struggling to meet the legal needs of their client communities, and we would not be able to continue our statewide eviction prevention project. We would also need to consider closing smaller offices in rural communities, leaving individuals in those communities without important protection. For example, studies have shown that communities without access



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to legal assistance, where perpetrators of violence are not held accountable, have a higher incidence of domestic violence.

Your investment in legal aid is a good investment for Oregon. The Oregon Law Foundation conducted an Economic Impact Study based on services provided in 2018 and found that for every \$1 spent on legal aid, Oregon receives \$3.43 in financial benefit to individuals and to the community including savings in community support costs for homeless individuals and families. Legal aid also promotes fairness in the justice system, which is a basic, core value in Oregon.

Together with the Oregon Judicial Department and Oregon State Bar, legal aid is a key partner in the effort to provide an efficient, trauma-informed, responsive, and accessible civil justice system. We appreciate your support for the OJD budget and legal aid funding through POP#130. Thank you for the opportunity to testify today.