

**Testimony Before the Joint Subcommittee on Public Safety
In Support of POP 130
On Behalf of The Oregon State Bar**

February 27, 2025

Co-Chairs Broadman and Evans and Members of the Committee:

My name is Keren Farkas, and I am the Chief Access to Justice Officer and Director of the Legal Services Program at the Oregon State Bar. The OSB's Legal Services Program (LSP) works closely with the Oregon Judicial Department and Oregon's network of civil and immigration legal service providers to ensure that all Oregonians—regardless of income—have meaningful access to the justice system. An adequately funded legal aid infrastructure and court system is foundational to achieving that goal.

The Critical Role of Legal Aid in Oregon

The nine state-funded legal aid organizations we support—including two you will hear from today—provide critical legal assistance to low-income Oregonians facing legal crises that threaten their housing, safety, and economic stability. Without access to legal representation, individuals navigating these challenges are left to do so alone, increasing the risk of homelessness, job loss, or prolonged family instability.

Civil legal aid also plays a preventive role, resolving legal issues before they escalate into crises that place a greater burden on state and local services. Studies have shown that timely legal intervention reduces demands on emergency housing, healthcare, and public assistance programs. Without legal assistance, routine civil legal matters—such as an eviction filing, denial of benefits, or wage theft—can spiral into costly emergencies, increasing expenditures on state-funded programs and social services.

Oregon's legal aid infrastructure remains under-resourced. The 2018 Oregon Civil Legal Needs Study found that only 16% of eligible Oregonians with a civil legal problem were able to access legal assistance. The impact is particularly severe for communities of color, women, and rural residents, who are disproportionately affected by the justice gap.

Investment in civil legal aid is also fiscally responsible, as numerous studies have demonstrated that investing in civil legal services yields substantial economic and social returns. A 2020 study in Oregon found that every \$1 invested in civil legal services generates \$3.43 in immediate and long-term benefits, including cost savings in housing assistance, unemployment benefits,

disability programs, and healthcare expenditures. A 2019 study on immigration legal services found an even higher return, with \$4.94 in economic benefits for every \$1 spent.

OSB's Oversight of Civil and Immigration Legal Services

The Oregon State Bar is responsible for fiscal and regulatory oversight of state-funded civil and immigration legal aid programs. OSB's role is to ensure that state resources are strategically allocated, efficiently administered, and that legal services are delivered effectively and equitably. Since 2019, state funding for civil legal aid services passes through the Oregon Judicial Department to the Oregon State Bar for distribution to nonprofit corporations that provide services to clients.

Civil Legal Services - Since 1997, the Oregon State Bar has provided fiscal and regulatory oversight of civil legal aid in Oregon. The three integrated, statewide civil legal aid providers are:

- Legal Aid Services of Oregon
- Oregon Law Center
- Center for Nonprofit Legal Services

Immigration Legal Services - Since 2021, OSB has administered funding and oversight for immigration legal aid, first through the Equity Corps of Oregon (ECO) Bridge Program and now through Oregon's Universal Representation initiative (SB 1543). OSB has since established program-specific standards and guidelines, expanded Provider capacity and supported the delivery of a range of legal help within a system that prioritizes urgent cases and connects people to the appropriate level of legal help based on their needs. The organizations that have received funding to provide immigration legal services during the 2023-25 biennium include:

- Catholic Charities of Oregon
- Catholic Community Services of Lane County
- Immigrant and Refugee Community Organization
- Lutheran Community Services Northwest
- Metropolitan Public Defender
- Oregon Law Center
- CLEAR Clinic
- SOAR Immigration Legal Services

OSB conducts continuous oversight to ensure that legal aid providers operate in compliance with state and national quality standards, including the OSB LSP Standards and Guidelines. Our oversight includes:

- **Regular evaluations of provider performance** and compliance with LSP Standards and Guidelines using financial and case data, community surveys, and provider reports

- **Responding to consumer-initiated complaints and working with providers** to improve access and service delivery, and
- **Statewide coordination of legal aid resources** to prevent duplication, increase efficiency, and ensure services are responsive, accessible, and delivered through the most effective models, whether via technology, community partnerships, or in-person representation

A statewide, integrated service delivery model is essential to meeting the needs of Oregon's most vulnerable residents. The Legal Services Program Standards and Guidelines require providers to coordinate resources, strategically deploy offices across regions, and ensure that services are complementary rather than duplicative. This approach fosters collaborative, intentional decision-making to effectively and efficiently meet statewide and regional needs.

The Work of Oregon's Civil and Immigration Legal Services Providers

Legal aid providers offer essential services across Oregon to ensure that low-income Oregonians can access justice and protect their rights.

Civil Legal Aid Services: The integrated, statewide civil legal aid providers offer services in all 36 counties through 18 field offices, helping a diverse range of clients, including:

- Domestic violence survivors in obtaining protective orders and custody arrangements.
- Disaster survivors with FEMA claims and insurance disputes.
- Tenants facing eviction or unsafe housing conditions.
- Seniors and individuals with disabilities in securing housing, healthcare, and financial stability.
- Workers and rural residents dealing with employment barriers such as wage theft and discrimination.

Civil legal aid providers offer direct legal representation, legal advice hotlines, community education, and self-help tools to ensure that Oregonians have access to justice, regardless of their ability to afford an attorney. In 2023, Oregon's civil legal aid providers served more than 27,000 clients statewide. The most common case types included housing (49%) and family rights (25%).

Legal aid empowers families in crisis by helping people stabilize their housing, healthcare, employment, and family situations. Through legal advocacy, legal aid prevents small problems from escalating into costly crises, reducing court congestion and ensuring Oregon's courts function more efficiently.

Immigration Legal Services: The immigration legal services organizations help protect the rights of low-income immigrants through a full range of legal assistance, from green card applications to deportation defense.

Legal representation correlates to positive immigration outcomes. Immigrants with attorneys are five times more likely to secure legal relief, allowing them to remain in Oregon, support their families, and contribute to their communities.

Oregon's immigration legal services network has served more than 1,800 people in just 1.5 years. Demand for these services has tripled since 2022, yet current funding will expire in 2025 unless additional resources are secured.

POP #130

POP #130 provides \$9.85 million to address the persistent and unmet demand for free, high-quality civil legal aid across Oregon. It includes:

Civil Legal Aid Funding - \$4.35 million

This investment will:

- Preserve existing service capacity and prevent reductions in legal aid staffing.
- Expand outreach and service delivery to increase access for low-income Oregonians.
- Enhance attorney recruitment and retention to strengthen Oregon's legal aid workforce.
- Improve operational efficiencies through technology integration, regional coordination, and service model innovation.

This funding is essential to sustaining Oregon's legal aid workforce, optimizing service delivery to make legal help more accessible, and reaching more low-income individuals and families in need. Without this investment, legal aid providers will struggle to maintain current capacity, and more Oregonians will be forced to navigate complex legal challenges without assistance.

Immigration Legal Services - \$5.5 million

Demand for immigration legal services has tripled since 2022, yet Oregon's current funding expires in 2025. This funding is necessary to:

- Ensure continued representation for those currently receiving services.
- Expand capacity to serve additional individuals impacted by new federal policies.
- Sustain and stabilize Oregon's immigration legal services network.

If this funding is not approved, Oregon risks a dramatic reduction in legal services for immigrants, leaving thousands vulnerable to deportation, fraud, and loss of employment.

Conclusion:

Oregon's legal aid infrastructure remains significantly under-resourced. The National Center for Access to Justice recommends 10 legal aid attorneys per 10,000 eligible low-income residents—yet Oregon has just 1.6 attorneys per 10,000.

POP 130 represents a targeted investment in Oregon's legal aid system that will protect access to justice for thousands of low-income residents.

We welcome your review.