



Public Safety Sub-Committee  
Joint Ways & Means Committee  
HB 5012  
Testimony of Monica Goracke, Oregon Law Center  
April 14, 2021

Good afternoon, Co-Chairs Gorsek, Sollman, and members of the Committee, my name is Monica Goracke. I live in Portland 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 to fund the Oregon Judicial Department, which includes support for legal aid funding.

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. The three legal aid organizations, 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 legal aid offices in 17 communities and we serve clients in all 36 Oregon counties. Our programs are strategic, effective, and efficient. We prioritize legal issues that protect people's livelihoods, health and safety, and family stability.

In this year of enormous upheaval and difficulty, legal aid has never stopped delivering high quality civil legal services to low-income Oregonians. Here are just some of legal aid's accomplishments over the past year:

- We quickly provided staff with technology and tools needed to work from home so that essential legal work on domestic violence, housing, public benefits, health, employment, civil rights, and consumer cases could continue uninterrupted.
- We created and distributed educational materials for clients about the rapidly changing legal developments affecting them, especially in the areas of housing and public benefits, using social media tools to reach many clients with this new information.
- We conducted virtual trainings for legal aid advocates and pro bono volunteers on these developments so they could be prepared to advise and represent clients.
- We added shifts to our statewide Public Benefits Hotline to help more clients with their questions related to unemployment and other changes to public benefits.

- We brought attention to lengthy delays in receiving unemployment benefits that were threatening basic survival for thousands of Oregonians and reached a settlement with the Oregon Employment Department that will ensure timely receipt of these critical benefits.
- We provided critical emergency assistance for Oregonians affected by the wildfires in September 2020. Our work included creating new client educational materials, coordinating with the Oregon State Bar's pro bono panel, creating our pro bono panel for FEMA appeals, setting up a disaster information website, and obtaining a national grant to provide direct legal representation to wildfire survivors.
- We advocated with local and state government agencies to implement health and safety measures for highly vulnerable members of the client community – including people experiencing homelessness and farmworkers.
- We advocated for the statewide eviction moratorium, which has helped prevent homelessness for thousands of Oregonians affected by the pandemic, as well as for rental assistance to tenants and landlords, and we provided education for both tenants and landlords about the moratorium.
- We addressed legal issues that keep thousands of Oregonians in poverty through our work on expungements and drivers' license suspensions for unpaid court fees and fines.
- We partnered with the Oregon Judicial Department, Oregon State Bar, Oregon Law Foundation, Oregon Consumer Justice, and other stakeholders to begin planning for the Oregon Civil Legal Access Portal Pilot Project, which will improve legal information and navigation of the legal system for all Oregonians.
- We strengthened our own organizational commitment to diversity, equity, and inclusion, so that we can more effectively work for racial justice for our clients.

Without a robust judicial department, many of these accomplishments would not be possible. The communities across Oregon in which we work rely on judges, family law facilitators, clerks, mediators, and other court staff to have meaningful access to justice.

As we have seen in previous times of economic hardship, the eligible client population for legal aid's services has significantly increased. This requires us to stretch our limited resources even further to meet our clients' needs. We are on the front lines of support for those who are suffering during this pandemic. We appreciate the support of the Oregon Legislature for the work we do. Thank you for the opportunity to testify today.