

**Testimony of Judge Kirsten Thompson
in support of SB 306**

January 18, 2023

Chair Prozanski and Members of the Committee:

I write in support of SB 306, set for hearing on January 18, 2023. SB 306 provides the necessary legislation to regulate and authorize the associate members of the Oregon State Bar to provide limited service to clients in the high need and high-volume areas of Family Law and Landlord Tenant law.

I had the privilege of serving as the chair of the Paraprofessional Licensing Implementation Committee from 2020-2022. Our committee included attorneys, paralegals, and a public member. We were supported by a large advisory group. Our job was to create an implementation plan for licensure of paralegals to provide direct service to clients in these high needs legal civil law areas as recommended by the report of the Future Task Force to the Oregon State Bar in 2017. Middle- and lower-income Oregonians are priced out of the market for legal services in these areas. Trained, licensed, and insured paralegals will provide a meaningful resource for individuals who are faced with important decisions regarding family and housing issues, but may not need all the services which a licensed attorney would provide.

The PLIC's work was received and approved by the Board of Governors for the Oregon State Bar for submission to the Oregon Supreme Court in July 2022. The Court unanimously approved the proposed program rules in July 2022. SB 306 clarifies existing statutes to facilitate bringing licensed paralegals into the framework of client protection and attorney regulation.

There is a great need for additional legal services for lower income individuals in the areas of family law and landlord tenant law. Survey results show that 84% of lower income Oregonians with legal needs are unable to receive assistance. Oregon Judicial Department records show that 83% of all parties in landlord tenant (FED - eviction) cases are unrepresented, and 71% of all parties in dissolution of marriage cases are unrepresented, while 55% of all parties in "other family law matters" are unrepresented. My experience as a judicial officer for 17 years in Washington County (2002-2019) confirms the accuracy of these statistics. Unrepresented parties are often confused and overwhelmed by complex court procedures, and are simply unable to afford the fees required by an attorney.

The addition of licensed paralegals is a sensible way to extend the existing services offered by attorneys much as nurse practitioners and physician's assistants extend the services offered by

doctors. Both family law and landlord tenant law are form driven and governed by statutes and regulations which are updated on a regular basis. Trained and licensed paralegals could provide excellent client service in routine matters while reserving higher risk and more complex matters to licensed attorneys. Required training, continuing education, and insurance will help to assure consumer protection. There is broad public support for licensure of paralegals to assist the public in these areas.

I urge you to approve this proposed legislation.

Respectfully,

Kirsten E. Thompson, Sr. Judge / Mediator
Chair Paraprofessional Licensing Implementation Committee