



Public Safety Sub-Committee
Joint Ways & Means Committee SB 5512
Testimony of Monica Goracke, Oregon Law Center
March 9, 2023

Co-Chairs Sollman, Evans, and members of the Sub-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 SB 5512 to fund the Oregon Judicial Department, which includes support for legal aid funding, as well as Policy Option Package 118 to increase 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 offices in 18 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 2021, legal aid served over 15,500 low-income individuals directly, 200,000 Oregonians through impact litigation, and hundreds of thousands of Oregonians through our administrative advocacy. 76% of legal aid's clients were women in 2021, reflecting a focus on serving survivors of domestic violence and sexual assault. We stretch our limited resources by providing self-help materials and through pro bono volunteer programs. Our educational website, OregonLawHelp.org, had more than 467,000 unique visitors.

As a result of one-time funding for our statewide Eviction Defense Project allocated in 2021, we have grown from 111 to 131 attorneys statewide, an increase of nearly 18%. The Eviction Defense Project has dramatically increased our capacity to help tenants stay in their homes and avoid homelessness. This in turn helps children stay in school and helps entire communities stay more stable. While we are thankful for this ability to serve more in need, we continue to have far greater need for our services than resources available. Currently there are 663,988 Oregonians living at or below 125% of the Federal Poverty Guidelines, which is 16% of Oregon's total population. With 131 attorneys, this means there is one legal aid attorney for

every 5,068 low-income individuals. As a comparison, there are about 15,000 active attorneys in the OSB, or one attorney for every 277 Oregonians overall.

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 32%. We also receive 23% of our support from the federal government. A cut to our state legislative funding would have a severe impact on our ability to continue to deliver legal services at our current level. We would have to lay off staff in offices that are already struggling to meet the legal needs of their client communities. We would not be able to open an office in the Columbia Gorge as planned, 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, which, as studies have shown, would result in a higher incidence of domestic violence in those counties.

Conversely, your investment in legal aid is a good investment for the state of Oregon. The Oregon Law Foundation conducted an Economic Impact Study in 2020 and found that for every \$1 spent on legal aid, Oregon receives \$3.43 in financial benefit to individuals and to the community. We are able to achieve these results because we are responsive to client needs as they arise, and we are closely connected to our client communities around the state. When people in need are not able to access civil legal assistance, the entire justice system is burdened. In addition, it can cost more to care for someone after an injustice occurs than it does to ensure equal access to justice.

Civil legal aid also benefits our state by promoting fairness in the justice system, which is a basic, core value in Oregon. The vast majority of tenants, debtors, and family law litigants do not have access to representation in the civil justice system. Supporting civil legal aid is a way to work for justice and access for all, not just the few who can afford it. As we saw during the pandemic, reduced access to the courts makes it more difficult for individuals to resolve their disputes and assert their rights. Together with the judges, family law facilitators, clerks, mediators, and other court staff of the Oregon Judicial Department, legal aid is a key partner in the effort to provide an efficient, trauma-informed, responsive, and accessible civil justice system. Just one of the many ways we are working together is on the Portal Project, our comprehensive upgrade of legal websites which will provide a single path to civil legal information, provide content in plain language, and provide interactive functionality to guide users to the most appropriate referral.

Finally, we would like to express our support for SB 235, which would increase the number of judges in Clackamas, Jackson, Lane, Marion, and Multnomah Counties. An effective and efficient justice system depends on having enough judges to manage the caseloads. Our clients benefit when their legal issues are able to be heard in a timely way.

We appreciate the support of the Oregon Legislature for the work we do. Thank you for the opportunity to testify today.