



Senate Judiciary Committee
SB 357
Testimony of Amy Edwards, Oregon Law Center
February 18, 2019

Chair Prozanski and members of the Committee, my name is Amy Edwards. I am the president of the board of directors of Oregon Law Center (OLC), one of the statewide legal aid programs in Oregon. Thank you for the opportunity to testify in support of SB 357 to provide increased support for legal aid.

Civil legal aid in Oregon ensures fairness in the justice system. It provides essential services to low-income Oregonians who are faced with legal emergencies. Our clients need legal aid's help to keep themselves and their children safe from domestic violence, protect their homes, find medical care and support their families. The majority of cases address family law, primarily domestic violence, and housing issues. The remainder of legal aid's cases focus on consumer, health, income, and other civil matters.

Three different nonprofit corporations work as an integrated service delivery system to provide civil legal services to low-income clients through offices around the state. Oregon Law Center and Legal Aid Services of Oregon are both statewide. The Center for Nonprofit Legal Services serves Jackson County. We use outreach, remote intake, collaboration with community partners, and toll-free telephone numbers to provide relatively equal access in all 36 counties. Legal aid also works to stretch its limited resources through self-help materials, public education, pro bono programs, and an informational website.

The increased revenue from SB 357 would be distributed through the Oregon State Bar Legal Services Program to the three nonprofit corporations that provide civil legal services, and would not result in additional funding to the Bar for administrative costs. The OSB Legal Services Program receives a fixed level of funding based on the actual cost of running the program, which is not calculated as a percentage of revenue received.

The Legal Services program provides government standards, guidelines, oversight, evaluation, and enforcement pursuant to ORS 9.572 to regulate the work done by the three nonprofit corporations that provide legal aid. These standards require joint planning and coordination among the programs. The standards also mandate that legal aid routinely conduct community needs assessments to target their services on the most compelling needs of the client community and to ensure the maximum use of scarce resources.

There are an estimated 807,000 low-income Oregonians who qualify for legal aid's help. We have 116 legal aid lawyers working in offices located in 17 communities serving clients living in all 36 counties. This means that Oregon currently has roughly two legal aid lawyers for

every 14,000 low-income individuals. In contrast, national standards have defined minimally adequate access to justice as two legal aid lawyers for every 10,000 low-income individuals.

Legal aid's current revenue stems from over 80 different sources of funding, which are a combination of federal, state, and private sources. The 2014 Task Force on Legal Aid Funding brought together Oregon lawyers, the courts, bar associations, legislators and other elected officials, and foundations to address the legal aid funding crisis. The task force concluded that in order to have a minimally adequate funded legal aid system, annual funding needed to be doubled.

SB 357 comes at a critical time for the legal aid system. State funding has remained at a flat level for the past eight years. We received funding to provide legal advice and representation on housing issues which will expire in 2020 and 2022. As a provider of services, well over 80% of our budget is dedicated to the staff who carry out our work. An increase in the statutory allocation, and tying the allocation to the consumer price index, will help stabilize legal aid funding so that we can hire, train, supervise, and retain highly qualified attorneys and staff to help our clients across the state. This type of funding gives us the flexibility we need to respond to changing client priorities. It also helps us provide service at consistent levels during times of economic downturn, when other funding sources tend to evaporate but higher numbers of clients are in desperate need of our services.

These funds will help us retain current staff as well as hire additional attorneys and support staff as directed by our strategic plan, which seeks to ensure relatively equal access to legal aid around the state. This funding, and especially the consumer price index adjustment, will allow us to keep our doors open and not fall further behind as we continue to address the legal needs of low-income Oregonians.

Thank you for giving me an opportunity to testify today and thank you, Chair Prozanski and members of the committee, for your support of legal aid through the years. I am happy to answer any questions.