



Senate Judiciary Committee
SB 357
Testimony of Monica Goracke, Oregon Law Center
February 18, 2019

Chair Prozanski and members of the Committee, my name is Monica Goracke. I am the executive director 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 revenue for legal aid.

I am new to the OLC executive director position, but spent just over nine years as the managing attorney of a regional legal aid office and four years as a legal aid staff attorney before that. In my first few months on the job last year, I traveled around the state to visit legal aid offices in places like Hillsboro, Eugene, Coos Bay, and Ontario. Seeing legal aid in action is a joyful experience and I recommend it to all of you. Our offices are deeply embedded in their communities. We have talented and hardworking attorneys and staff who are completely dedicated to helping their clients. Some have put in decades of work with legal aid, and some are in their first one or two years of practice. No matter where they live or how long they have been doing the work, they share a passion for untangling the complex knot of legal problems that can imperil the safety, security, and well-being of a low-income individual or family.

I am here today to ask you to support our request for an increase in operational funding and a consumer price index adjustment for legal aid. Your vote to increase Oregon's investment in its legal aid system will matter for five important reasons.

First, legal aid is a lifeline for domestic violence and sexual assault survivors. Our 2018 legal needs study showed that survivors suffer civil legal problems at significantly higher rates compared to the general population. For example, households with survivors were 6.2 times more likely to experience the effects of homelessness, and three times more likely to have an employment issue. Violence is pervasive, causing disruption to our clients' housing, jobs, and children's educations. Research has shown that increasing access to civil legal aid is one of the most effective strategies to reduce rates of domestic violence.¹ Survivors represented by a lawyer are much more likely to obtain a protective order and to address related legal matters that help them achieve greater economic self-sufficiency, often a crucial prerequisite to leaving an abusive relationship.

¹See "Supporting Survivors: The Economic Benefits of Providing Civil Legal Assistance to Survivors of Domestic Violence," Institute for Policy Integrity at New York University School of Law, July 2015, available at <https://policyintegrity.org/documents/SupportingSurvivors.pdf>

Second, legal aid is critical to rural communities in Oregon. Rural, low-income Oregonians face unique challenges in accessing legal services, including the distance they must travel to a lawyer's office combined with the lack of affordable transportation options. Because legal aid offices are not present in every community, many rural Oregonians may not know that help is available. That's why our staff work countless hours to travel around their often large service areas to let people know help is available and to provide rural clients with effective legal assistance. Another important finding of our legal needs study was that even though homelessness is often perceived as an urban problem, homelessness actually increases in prevalence the more rural a county is. Legal aid's work to protect tenants, prevent homelessness, and stand up for the rights of homeless individuals matters in rural counties as much or more than it does in more populous counties.

Third, as you know, legal aid provides justice and fairness for low-income clients of all backgrounds, but in particular, we focus on vulnerable Oregonians such as seniors, single mothers, and people with disabilities. We learned from our legal needs study that Oregon's community of people with disabilities disproportionately experience legal problems and are disproportionately low-income. Legal aid helps by taking cases where disability benefits are reduced or terminated, and where a senior or person with a disability is suffering abuse. We also found that single parents were 2.8 times more likely to have a family law problem, and over 2.5 times more likely to be in a household affected by homelessness. Legal aid offices work hard to reach vulnerable clients who may not know how to access our services and may have complex barriers to navigating the justice system. We are here to protect those with nowhere else to turn.

Fourth, legal aid brings economic benefits to Oregon. One of the primary questions we ask ourselves when deciding whether to accept a case is, if in doing so, we can preserve or increase the stability of an individual or family. This might mean keeping them in their home, or helping them gain or keep needed subsistence benefits such as food stamps or Social Security Disability. Legal assistance makes a difference not just for the individual served, but for the community and the entire state. Our work helps reduce medical and mental health care costs, as well as criminal justice system costs. It directly creates tangible and intangible benefits associated with lessening children's exposure to violence. We accomplish this at a funding level that equals just four hundredths of a percent of Oregon's total state budget, and the increase we seek is modest. Oregon currently spends \$9.78 per person on someone who is eligible for legal aid and has a legal problem. SB 357 would raise that per-person expenditure to \$12.33 per low-income person with a legal problem – a slight \$2.55 increase. Legal aid is efficient and cost-effective.

Fifth and finally, legal aid promotes the rule of law. We help people understand their rights and responsibilities under the laws. We help enforce the laws that are adopted by the

legislature. We provide a level playing field where low-income people can seek a peaceful resolution of their civil legal issues. In short, our work is essential to making the justice system accessible and accountable, and that is good for the entire state of Oregon.

Your support for SB 357 will give us the stability we need to continue to help Oregon's low-income communities. Thank you for giving me an opportunity to testify today and thank you, Chair Prozanski and members of the committee, for your ongoing support of legal aid. I am happy to answer any questions.