

2019 Support for Legal Aid SB 357

Oregon State Bar

The Oregon State Bar is joined by legal aid providers in urging the Legislature to increase state funding of legal aid.

What is Legal Aid?

Legal aid provides essential civil legal services to more than 28,000 low-income and elderly Oregonians each year. This assistance to vulnerable Oregonians helps them protect their livelihoods, their health and safety, and their families. Legal aid:

- Provides legal help to victims of domestic violence, by working to stop the cycle of violence and keep families safe.
- Works to reduce homelessness by helping to keep families in stable housing.
- Works closely with the courts to develop innovative electronic forms to increase self-help access for unrepresented litigants on matters related to domestic violence, family law, housing, small claims and other matters.

SB 357 – Stabilizing Funding for Legal Aid

In Oregon, Legal Aid is funded by a combination of federal and state dollars, donations from private attorneys, grant funding and other sources. SB 357 passed the Senate Judiciary Committee unanimously and is currently in the Joint Committee for Ways and Means. The bill does two important things:

- Increases the current Oregon statutory allocation dedicated to funding legal aid operations by \$3.1 million per biennium. This would allow legal aid to close a small part of the gap between the need that is highlighted in the 2018 Civil Legal Needs Study and its current ability meet that need.
- Creates an ongoing annual increase to the statutory allocation based on the Consumer Price Index (CPI). This annual increase will help keep legal aid from falling farther and farther behind each biennium.

Who is providing the service?

There are 100 legal aid lawyers in Oregon, working out of offices located in 17 communities, serving low-income people living in all 36 counties. It costs approximately \$300,000 per year to operate a small rural office and about \$80,000 per year to cover the costs of a newer staff attorney. Overall it costs about \$31 million per biennium to operate the current integrated system that provides relatively equal access to civil legal services statewide.

Legal aid was forced to cut 20% of the staff positions in 2011, and has not been able to fully replace all of those positions. Increasing the state allocation permits legal aid to hire and retain the staff necessary to provide civil legal services to low-income people statewide.