Support for Legal Aid

What is Legal Aid?

Legal aid provides essential civil legal services to more than 22,000 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 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;

What is the current need?

- Current funding meets only about 15% of the civil legal needs of the poor, and Oregon’s increasing population risks pushing that number in the wrong direction.
- The Campaign for Equal Justice Task Force on Legal Aid Funding, which included elected officials and leaders in the legal community, concluded that we need to double funding for legal aid in order to provide even minimally adequate service.
- National standards call for two legal aid lawyers for every 10,000 low-income individuals for minimal access, yet Oregon has only two per 17,000.

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 about $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.

The Oregon State Bar is aware that crafting the 2017 – 2019 state budget is a challenge. From the need for transportation infrastructure investment, to adequate funding for K-12 education, there are funding needs throughout the state. In the face of these challenges, Oregon State Bar asks lawmakers to remember the civil legal needs of low income Oregonians. In Oregon, we believe in justice for all, not just for those who can afford it.