

Justice Begins with the Rule of Law

A message from the 2025 Oregon State Bar Board of Governors

On February 5, 1958, President Dwight D. Eisenhower established May 1 as the first official Law Day, stating that “If civilization is to survive, it must choose the rule of law.”

Each year, Law Day invites us to reflect on the meaning of that choice—and on how the rule of law shapes our everyday lives as Oregonians.

The rule of law is more than a legal phrase; it’s the foundation of our democracy. It ensures that no one is above the law and that everyone is equally protected by it. It provides a check on government power and guarantees fair and impartial justice. And it affirms that access to the courts—and to the legal help needed to get there—is essential for all.

But the rule of law does not sustain itself. It requires champions, even here in Oregon. And that responsibility belongs to all of us, not just those who work in the legal system.

Consider this: the vast majority of low-income Oregonians facing civil legal challenges—like eviction, job loss, child custody, or immigration issues—struggle to access the help they need. These are often urgent, life-altering problems, yet navigating them in our courts without legal guidance can feel impossible. Even those of moderate-income often struggle to find the help they need. The consequences are profound, and the injustice is real.

We can do better. The Oregon State Bar continues to advocate for adequate funding for civil and immigration legal services. We also recently launched **OregonLawHelp.org**, an interactive website available in multiple languages—developed in partnership with Oregon courts and nonprofit legal organizations—to better connect people with legal information and support.

Meanwhile, new challenges arise.

State and federal courts in Oregon report growing security threats aimed at courthouses themselves, at litigants and witnesses, and increasingly at individual judges. Our rural courts are particularly vulnerable. Many courthouses themselves are in dangerous states of disrepair.

Courts are accessible only if they are safe for all to enter. Judges can be fair and impartial only when they are free from threats and intimidation. We need to fund court infrastructure, bolster security, and ensure that our judges are free to do their work without intimidation.

The legal profession itself also faces challenges that impact the rule of law. Across the country—and here in Oregon—lawyers are confronting new limitations on their ability to

represent clients and make legal arguments, particularly in areas like immigration civil rights. Even large firms with deep Pacific Northwest roots, like Perkins Coie, face daunting challenges to their ability to advocate freely and fully on behalf of their clients.

This is not just a problem for legal professionals, but for the clients they represent. If lawyers are silenced, Oregonians ultimately lose.

Businesses would face a limited pool of lawyers and firms able to bring their arguments before a court of law. Lawyers might temper their advocacy in order to preserve their ability to advocate at all. Individuals at their most vulnerable—some of whom may be unpopular or have an unpopular cause—might struggle to find someone willing or able to represent them in court.

A system that promises equal justice for all cannot function if voices are excluded or chilled. If we want a system where the law applies equally to all, we must protect the right to a strong and independent legal defense—even, and especially, when the cause is unpopular.

On this Law Day 2025, which also marks the 90th anniversary of the Oregon State Bar, we celebrate and recommit to the rule of law. For inspiration, we look to one of its most storied champions: John Adams. Though a leader in the American revolution, he represented British soldiers after the Boston Massacre in 1770. He believed in a fair trial and defense for all, even those with whom he disagreed. He believed in the rule of law.

We also celebrate the principle that our courts are empowered to interpret the law free from improper interference – a bedrock of our system since Chief Justice Marshal established the principle of judicial review, with *Marbury v. Madison* in 1803.

As the Oregon State Bar’s Board of Governors, we write on our own behalf as lawyers and members of the public who volunteer for an organization whose mission we believe in: to serve justice and the public interest by promoting respect for the rule of law.

We hope that Oregonians will take this month to deepen their understanding and reflect on the importance of the rule of law—not just in the abstract, but within our communities.

We all – not just lawyers - have a stake in preserving a justice system where every Oregonian can ask for the help of a legal professional and then walk confidently and safely through the courthouse doors to seek justice.

Not just on May 1, but in perpetuity.