

Oregon State Bar
House of Delegates Resolution
Resolution in Support of Adequate Funding for Legal Services to Low-Income Oregonians
Passed November 4, 2016

Whereas, providing equal access to justice and high quality legal representation to all Oregonians is central to the mission of the Oregon State Bar;

Whereas, equal access to justice plays an important role in the perception of fairness of the justice system;

Whereas, programs providing civil legal services to low-income Oregonians is a fundamental component of the Bar's effort to provide such access;

Whereas, since 1998, pursuant to ORS 9.575, the Oregon State Bar has operated the Legal Services Program to manage and provide oversight for the state statutory allocation for legal aid in accordance with the Bar's Standards and Guidelines (which incorporate national standards for operating a statewide legal aid program);

Whereas, during the great recession the staffing for legal aid programs was reduced while the poverty population in Oregon increased dramatically, thus broadening "the justice gap" in Oregon;

Whereas, Oregon's legal aid program currently has resources to meet about 15% of the civil legal needs of Oregon's poor creating the largest "justice gap" for low-income and vulnerable Oregonians in recent history;

Whereas, Oregon currently has 1 legal aid lawyer for every 8,500 low-income Oregonians, but the national standards for a minimally adequately funded legal aid program is 2 legal aid lawyers for every 10,000 low-income Oregonians;

Whereas, assistance from the Oregon State Bar and the legal community is critical to maintaining and developing resources that will provide low-income Oregonians meaningful access to the justice system.

Resolved, that the Oregon State Bar;

- (1) Strengthen its commitment and ongoing efforts to improve the availability of a full range of legal services to all citizens of our state, through the development and maintenance of adequate support and funding for Oregon's legal aid programs and through support for the Campaign for Equal Justice.
- (2) Request that Congress and the President of the United States make a genuine commitment to equal justice by adequately funding the Legal Services Corporation, which provides federal support for legal aid.
- (3) Work with Oregon's legal aid programs and the Campaign for Equal Justice to preserve and increase state funding for legal aid and explore other sources of new funding.
- (4) Actively participate in the efforts of the Campaign for Equal Justice to increase contributions by the Oregon legal community, by establishing goals of a 100% participation rate by members of the House of Delegates, 75% of Oregon State Bar Sections contributing \$50,000, and a 50% contribution rate by all lawyers.
- (5) Support the Oregon Law Foundation and its efforts to increase resources through the interest on Lawyers Trust Accounts (IOLTA) program, and encourage Oregon lawyers to bank at OLF Leadership Banks that pay the highest IOLTA rates.
- (6) Support the Campaign for Equal Justice in efforts to educate lawyers and the community about the legal needs of the poor, legal services delivery and access to justice for low-income and vulnerable Oregonians.
- (7) Encourage Oregon lawyers to support civil legal services programs through enhanced pro bono work.
- (8) Support the fundraising efforts of those nonprofit organizations that provide civil legal services to low-income Oregonians that do not receive funding from the Campaign for Equal Justice.

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Background

“The mission of the Oregon State Bar is to serve justice by promoting respect for the rule of law, by improving the quality of legal services and by increasing access to justice.” OSB Bylaw 1.2. One of the four main functions of the bar is to be “a provider of assistance to the public. As such, the bar seeks to ensure the fair administration of justice for all.” *Id.*

The Board of Governors and the House of Delegates have adopted a series of resolutions supporting adequate funding for civil legal services in Oregon (Delegate Resolutions in 1996, 1997, 2002, 2005–2015). This resolution is similar to the resolution passed in 2015, but provides updates on the ratio of legal aid lawyers to Oregonians eligible for legal aid services.

The legal services organizations in Oregon were established by the state and local bar associations to increase access for low-income clients. The majority of the boards of the legal aid programs are appointed by state and local bar associations. The Oregon State Bar operates the Legal Services Program pursuant to ORS 9.572 to distribute the state statutory allocation for civil legal services and provide methods for evaluating the legal services programs. The Campaign for Equal Justice works collaboratively with the Oregon Law Foundation and the Oregon State Bar to support Oregon’s legal aid programs. The Bar and the Oregon Law Foundation each appoint a member to serve on the board of the Campaign for Equal Justice.

Oregon’s legal aid program consists of four separate non-profits that work together as part of an integrated service delivery system designed to provide high priority free civil legal services to low-income Oregonians in all 36 Oregon counties through offices in 17 communities. There are two statewide programs, Legal Aid Services of Oregon (LASO) and the Oregon Law Center (OLC); and two county wide programs, Lane County Legal Aid and Advocacy Center and the Center for Non-Profit Legal Services (Jackson County). Because the need is great and resources are limited, legal aid offices address high priority civil legal issues such as safety from domestic violence, housing, consumer law, income maintenance (social security, unemployment insurance, and other self-sufficiency benefits), health, employment and individual rights. About 37% of legal aid’s cases are family law cases, usually helping victims of domestic violence. All of these programs work to stretch limited resources through pro bono programs and self help materials. Legal aid’s website, oregonlawhelp.com receives about 167,000 unique visitors a year.

Providing access to justice and high quality legal representation to all Oregonians is a central and important mission of the Oregon State Bar. An Oregon study concluded that low-income Oregonians who have access to a legal aid lawyer have a much improved view of the legal system compared with those who do not have such access: 75% of individuals without access to a lawyer had negative feelings about the legal system, but of those who had access to a legal aid lawyer, 75% had a positive view of the legal system regardless of the outcome of their case. The 2014 Task Force on Legal Aid Funding, which included representatives of the Bar, the Law Foundation, the judiciary, the legislature and private practice concluded that legal aid funding should be doubled over the next 10 years. Because funding for legal aid is a state, federal and private partnership, with about 80 different sources of funding, increases in funding must be made across the board to address the justice gap.

Currently, slightly more than 20% of lawyers contribute to the Campaign for Equal Justice, but in some Oregon regions (Jackson County and Lane County, for example), participation is as high as 40%.