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Testimony in Support of House Bill 5  
Presented by Todd Book  
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Ohio State Bar Association

Before the House Criminal Justice Committee  
George F. Lang, Chair  
May 30, 2019

Chairman Lang, Vice Chair Plummer, Ranking member Leland and members of the House Criminal Justice Committee:

I am Todd Book, Chief Policy Officer of the Ohio State Bar Association (OSBA) and I want to thank you for allowing me to present proponent testimony on behalf of the OSBA concerning House Bill 5, the bill to create the Ohio Public Defender State Loan Repayment Program.

As we all know, the rising costs of higher education, including a law school education, has made it cost prohibitive for many interested students to pursue a law degree. Additionally, for many of those who do follow the call of the law, they find themselves with a crushing amount of debt that forces them to chase after the highest-paying job instead of using their degree to help the less fortunate or work in the public sector.

Recognizing these and other challenges facing the legal profession, the OSBA in 2017 adopted its Futures Commission Report. That report calls upon the OSBA to advocate for law changes to implement a student loan/debt forgiveness program for new lawyers willing to serve in underserved, non-urban areas. Therefore, we see the value of HB 5 and support it but ask that the legislature look to expand the bill beyond the realm of public defenders to include new attorneys working in underserved parts of Ohio.

To help explain the need, I have attached a map highlighting the number of attorneys compared to the county population.

This data represents the status of the legal profession in late 2017. The reality is new lawyers are more likely to work in the more urban areas of Ohio. For various reasons, they are less attracted to the more rural parts of the state. Nonetheless, the population in the more rural areas still have legal needs and they are having a harder and harder time getting those needs met. In order to help alleviate this shortage of attorneys in underserved portions of Ohio, the OSBA has created the Rural Practice Initiative, but that program alone cannot meet the need.

Similar to medicine and dentistry, the state has used loan forgiveness as an incentive to motivate young practitioners to gravitate to the underserved areas to meet the needs of Ohioans living there.

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We commend the bill sponsors for their efforts and support the bill, but we ask this committee to think about expanding the bill to include loan forgiveness for all attorneys committing to work in rural/underserved parts of Ohio.

Another area of the bill where the OSBA stands ready to assist this committee deals with funding the program. As you know, there is currently no dedicated source of funding. We want to be helpful with those discussions as the bill moves through the process.

Thank you for allowing me to testify and I am available to answer questions.

