



Testimony in Support of House Bill 150
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Ohio State Bar Association

Before the House Criminal Justice Committee
Representative Jeff LaRe, Chair
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Chairman LaRe, Vice Chair Swearingen, Ranking Member Leland and members of House Criminal Justice Committee:

I am Scott Lundregan, Director of Policy and Legislative Counsel for 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 150, the bill to create the Ohio Public Defender State Loan Repayment Program.

As we all know, the rising cost of higher education, including a law school, has kept many interested students from pursuing professional degrees. 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 other public service legal areas.

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 are thrilled to be here advocating for HB 150. We are also pleased to see that the program has been expanded from the original bill to now also include court-appointed counsel. We advocated for this last year because a lot of counties with the greatest need for attorneys only utilize court-appointed counsel.

We keep up to date statistics about the ratio of a counties' population to the amount of active attorneys in that county. Currently, we would classify 59 counties as being underrepresented, with a ratio of more than 700 residents to 1 attorney. This is unacceptable.

The reality is new lawyers are wanting 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. Using funding from the Supreme Court and the Ohio State Bar Foundation, we pair law students with practitioners in rural communities so they can be exposed to these opportunities. 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.

We commend the bill sponsors for their efforts and the Ohio House for passing the bill last general assembly.

Thank you for the opportunity to testify in support of this bill and I would be happy to answer any questions.