



Senate Finance Committee
House Bill 5 – Proponent Written Testimony

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Chairman Dolan, Vice Chair Burke, Ranking Member Sykes, and members of the Senate Finance Committee, thank you for the opportunity to submit written proponent testimony in support of House Bill 5, which would establish the Ohio Public Defender State Loan Repayment Program.

Modeled after existing loan repayment programs for physicians, dentists and dental hygienists, the Ohio Public Defender State Loan Repayment Program would allow the State Public Defender to repay certain loans held by attorneys working as public defenders in designated shortage areas across the state. Under the program, qualifying attorneys would commit to serving as a public defender in a shortage area for a period of at least three years, with the option of an additional one or two more years of service. These public defender shortage areas would be designated by the State Public Defender based on case load relative to public defenders.

As the provider of indigent defense services, counties understand the importance of ensuring quality legal representation for those who cannot afford their own legal counsel. The right to competent legal counsel is a pillar of our justice system. Skilled public defenders also ensure a smoother operating criminal justice system which ultimately reduces taxpayer cost.

The high cost of acquiring legal education today places a significant financial burden on many young attorneys, precluding many from pursuing public service careers, such as working as a public defender. This ultimately leads to shortages of talented public defenders in certain areas of the state. This legislation is a good step in alleviating some of the financial burden borne by young public defenders and helps ensure that quality legal counsel is available in Ohio regardless of geographic location.



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CCAO is also supportive of a House amendment added to the bill which would establish a task force to study the delivery, structure and funding of Ohio's indigent defense system. Ohio's indigent defense system is in need of significant reform. The 16-member task force created in the bill would bring the necessary stakeholders to the table for a comprehensive review of the system and to lay the groundwork for meaningful system reform.

CCAO thanks Representatives Hillyer and Leland for introducing this legislation to strengthen our public defender system. CCAO also thanks the committee for its consideration of our supportive testimony on this important piece of legislation.