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House Bill 354 Interested Party Testimony
House Finance Committee
Colleen Cotter, Chair and
Kathleen McGarvey, Vice Chair
Alliance of Ohio Legal Aids
December 12, 2023

Chair Edwards, Vice-Chair LaRe, Ranking Member Sweeney, thank you for the opportunity to provide interested party testimony on House Bill 354. We are Colleen Cotter, Executive Director of The Legal Aid Society of Cleveland and Kathleen McGarvey, Executive Director of Ohio State Legal Services Association. We also have the honor of working with our Legal Aid Society colleagues and serving as chair and vice-chair of our membership organization, the Alliance of Ohio Legal Aids.

The Alliance of Ohio Legal Aids is a collaboration among Ohio's regional nonprofit Legal Aid Societies. Collectively, we serve every county in Ohio. We provide high quality free civil legal assistance to low-income Ohioans. You can see the list of our members as part of this testimony.

Unlike in the criminal justice system, there is no right to an attorney in civil cases. Yet the civil justice system can provide the key for families to access housing, health, safety, and economic security. Civil legal aid is a combination of services and resources that helps Ohioans of all backgrounds—including those who face the toughest legal challenges: children, veterans, seniors, and victims of domestic violence—to effectively navigate the justice system.

In 2022, Alliance members served 132,640 individuals and their families. We helped 2,700 Ohioans seal or expunge their criminal records or reinstate driver's licenses, removing barriers to employment and helped nearly 5,000 domestic violence survivors achieve safety. We helped thousands of Ohioans with housing stability through eviction and foreclosure assistance.

Addressing civil legal issues can be life changing. Consider the story of George Johnson. Mr. Johnson came to Legal Aid looking to expunge a minor misdemeanor drug conviction. He had paid all his fines, but having the conviction on his record was a barrier to employment even years later. Legal Aid helped Mr. Johnson complete the paperwork to file for an expungement. But lost paperwork

and miscommunication back and forth with the court would hinder Mr. Johnson for months. A Legal Aid attorney stepped in, filing another motion to seal Mr. Johnson's conviction record. The court finally scheduled a hearing and the judge granted the motion to seal the conviction records.

As Mr. Johnson described it, he just made a dumb mistake, hanging out with the wrong people. Because of Legal Aid, Mr. Johnson is now able to seek employment free of any shadows from his past and with the expungement of his criminal record, his fears and frustration of not being able to compete in the job market are alleviated. He has his second chance.

Mr. Johnson's story illustrates how legal aids secure second chances. Expungement of past criminal records benefits individuals, families, and communities. It can remove barriers to employment, professional licenses, access to credit, and even housing.

As you finalize House Bill 354, we ask that you consider the important work of Legal Aid in your district. We ask that you direct cannabis tax revenue to expand the reach of our services.

In every Ohio House District, Legal Aid plays a critical role in helping to remove barriers to employment and support community development. Legal Aid helps individuals who have previously been arrested or incarcerated—and their family members who suffer financial harm—overcome the negative consequences of past convictions related to employment, business ownership, housing, health, and long-term financial well-being.

Specifically Legal Aid:

- assists individuals with criminal record sealing and certificates of qualification for employment (CQEs) to remove barriers to employment,
- represents low-income small business owners in helping to start new businesses and in navigating legal issues in their businesses,
- represents individuals at risk of eviction and foreclosure, and
- represents individuals faced with wage garnishments, debt collection lawsuits, and those in need of bankruptcy assistance.

The Legal Services Corporation's most recent Justice Gap report shows that 74 percent of low-income households experienced at least one civil legal problem in the last year. More than half stated that these problems substantially impacted their lives. Unfortunately, the report shows that Legal Aids across the country must turn away one out of every two requests they receive due to limited resources. This is true throughout Ohio. Legal Aids have the skills to serve the needs of our communities and resolve fundamental civil legal issues. The only thing that prevents us meeting the critical needs of our communities – of your communities – is lack of resources. We have the ability to expand our services, with additional resources that the cannabis tax revenue can help provide.

Please consider using a portion of the marijuana tax proceeds to boost Legal Aid services across the state. We are asking for a percentage of the tax revenue that would generate at least \$5 million annually. This would significantly increase the number of low-income Ohioans that Legal Aid can serve. It would bring stability to families across the state.

Thank you for your time and your consideration. We would be happy to answer any questions.