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Contact:

Audrey Martin
The Legal Aid Society
amartin@legal-aid.org

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35 District Attorneys, Public Defender Offices, Civil Legal Services Providers and Unions Sign Advocacy Letter In Support of Legislation to Increase Student Loan Aid for Attorneys Serving the Public Interest

(NEW YORK, NY) – A coalition of 35 district attorney offices, public defender offices, civil legal services providers, unions and others signed onto a [letter calling](#) on Governor Hochul and the New York State Legislature to ensure the inclusion of [legislation](#) in the upcoming budget that would bolster the District Attorney and Indigent Legal Services Attorney Loan Forgiveness (DALF) program.

The legislation, carried by State Senator Jessica Ramos and Assembly Member Jo Anne Simon, would increase student loan aid from up to \$3,400 to \$8,000 annually, for up to eight years, or total award eligibility of up to \$64,000 in total. Just yesterday, the Senate passed DALF and the bill is currently in committee in the Assembly.

Under the current program, lawyers serving the public interest can receive up to a total of \$20,400 over six years to pay down their student loans, putting them [well behind](#) the award amounts allotted for registered nurses on teaching faculties and social workers, who perform vital work but, on average, carry less debt than [public interest lawyers](#). During the height of the Covid-19 pandemic, the federal student loan pause gave experienced public sector attorneys critical financial relief, allowing them to stay in their jobs and provide essential advocacy to low-income New Yorkers. With the ending of the pause and the sky-rocketing cost of living in the state, the need to expand this loan assistance program is [more crucial than ever](#).

The letter states:

Student loan cancellation and assistance remains a hugely popular and crucial policy plank both locally and nationally. By endorsing this loan assistance bill you will remove the barriers to building wealth and a secure future here in our state for attorneys working on behalf of New Yorkers.

This issue crosses the aisle of the adversarial system, as evidenced by our organizational support shown here, and within the two party system as evidenced by the support in the legislative body. The Senate passed this bill, championed by Senator Ramos, with overwhelming bipartisan support last year with a vote of 57-1 and last month once again unanimously voted the bill out of committee to the floor of the Senate where it is on third reading.

We urge you to include this modest funding and crucial legislative framework in the FY25 final budget and ensure that some measure of debt relief is on the horizon for attorneys working for our organizations and on behalf of the state –and the people – of New York.

“Increasing student loan relief for attorneys — who, on average, carry \$130,000 of student loan debt — will help ease the financial burdens driving attorneys out of our organizations and into the private sector, impeding low-income New Yorkers’ access to justice,” said **Twyla Carter, Attorney-in-Chief and Chief Executive Officer of The Legal Aid Society**. “Governor Hochul and the New York State Legislature must prioritize this legislation

in the upcoming budget to ensure that public interest lawyers can continue providing vital legal services for our clients without undue financial strain created by exorbitant student loan debt.”

“District Attorney's Office across the state are experiencing high attrition rates. Unfortunately, the combination of lower public service salaries and a constantly increasing cost of living often leads to talented practitioners leaving our offices for the private sector. Increasing the amount of student loan repayment assistance provided by DALF until attorneys can qualify for federal loan forgiveness will make a big impact on incentivizing assistant district attorneys to continue using their talents to serve the public interest. The District Attorneys Association State of New York strongly urges the passage of S4511C/A1568D to ensure that attorneys providing these critical and legally mandated services feel compelled and financially able to remain in their roles as some measure of debt relief will now be on the horizon,” said **John J. Flynn, Erie County District Attorney and President of the District Attorneys Association of the State of New York.**

“Our dedicated prosecutors and public defense colleagues often begin their careers with crushing student debt, and New York’s high cost of living makes it hard to get by on government and non-profit salaries. This funding will provide much-needed relief to the attorneys we rely upon to seek justice, promote fairness, defend the rights of the accused, and to support victims. It will also help retain the talented and ethical attorneys we need to do this challenging work that is so vital to our legal system. I encourage the Legislature and Governor Hochul to support this important legislation,” said **Brooklyn District Attorney Eric Gonzalez.**

“Attorneys working for the public in the criminal justice system desperately need this lifeline to mitigate what is too often crushing student loan debt,” said **Chris Liberati-Conant, Columbia County District Attorney.**

“A functioning criminal justice system demands quality attorneys,” said **Anthony Jordan, Washington County District Attorney.** “This additional aid will help recruit and retain quality individuals to pursue a career in public service.”

“Many young public interest attorneys are saddled with huge debt from undergraduate and law school studies. They take these types of public sector jobs because they care about our justice system, often giving up significantly higher paying private sector jobs. Unfortunately, many struggle to make ends meet because they have chosen to do the right thing for our communities. Student loan relief is a small perk that helps make it possible for these young attorneys to survive,” said **Joseph G. Fazzary, Schuyler County District Attorney.**

“Debt relief for attorneys committed to serving marginalized and vulnerable New Yorkers is critical to creating a truly equitable justice system,” said **Karen Freedman, Executive Director, Lawyers For Children.**

“New Yorkers facing incarceration, family separation, eviction, and other serious harms in the legal system rely on the zealous representation provided by our dedicated and skilled attorneys who have devoted their careers to public service,” said **Lisa Schreibersdorf, Executive Director of Brooklyn Defender Services.** “Unfortunately, high student loan debt burdens make it difficult for experienced lawyers to stay in public interest positions. Expansion of the HESC/DALF program is critical to ensure attorneys can continue to serve New Yorkers.”

“This will help agencies like ours attract attorneys to work in the public sector fields,” said **Angelica Parado-Abaya from Citizens Concerned for Children, Inc. (Ithaca, NY)**

“This legislation is important to address the high turnover rate of attorneys working in Family Court and in criminal law,” said **Mark Funk, Administrator of the Monroe County Assigned Counsel Program.**

“This legislation must be prioritized to ensure that people experiencing poverty, and often Black and brown individuals, continue to have a lawyer by their side. And that's not just any lawyer, but one who has made a commitment to public service. Public defenders are burdened with well over \$100,000 in law school debt, and

this legislation would go far in supporting talented, committed attorneys,” said **Caprice R. Jenersen, President and Attorney in Charge, Office of the Appellate Defender (OAD)**.

“Underinvestment in the District Attorney and Indigent Legal Services Loan Forgiveness (DALF) program in an underinvestment in our city’s public defenders, who are tasked with protecting the rights of the most vulnerable members of our community from a legal system that criminalizes poverty, mental illness, and rampant and increasing inequity,” said **Lori Zeno, Executive Director of Queens Defenders**. “It is no secret that Public Defenders forgo higher salaries and benefits in the private sector in their commitment to a public service career. Increasing the DALF award cap for public defenders will help address the attrition crisis being experienced by legal services organizations in New York and show our Public Defenders that they are vital – and valued – members of our legal system.”

“Rural counties already have a small number of lawyers available for public service work. Augmented student loan assistance would be a big step in ensuring the right to counsel across upstate New York by making sure newer lawyers can make ends meet while helping their rural communities,” said **Andrew D. Correia, Wayne County Public Defender**.

“I urge the Governor and Legislative leaders to enhance the state’s loan forgiveness program via S4511C/A1568D. Doing so would acknowledge the integral value of attorneys working to serve the public. Expanding the total eligible award and period of eligibility will alleviate a great debt burden on these attorneys and address unprecedented attrition that affects public defender and district attorney offices statewide,” said **Laurette Mulry, Attorney in Charge of the Legal Aid Society of Suffolk County**.

“Student loan debt is a significant barrier to recruiting and retaining public defense and civil legal services attorneys. Years ago, New York recognized this problem and created the loan forgiveness program in Education Law 679-e. While that program has helped relieve the student debt burden for many attorneys, it has not kept pace with the dramatic increase in law school tuition. We urge the Governor and the Legislature to expand the program in this year’s state budget to ensure that attorneys are able to stay in their critical public service positions for the long term,” said **Susan Bryant, Executive Director of the New York State Defenders Association**.

“Our union members fight tirelessly for vulnerable New Yorkers in our Criminal, Civil, and Family courts every day, but the crushing burden of student loan debt often makes it impossible for them to continue to work in public service and take care of their own families. Expanding the annual DALF award would ease this financial stressor and ensure that our clients have experienced advocates by their side for years to come. With this targeted, common sense investment in our public service legal sector, the Governor and the Legislature have the opportunity to strengthen access to justice in our state for years to come,” said **Lisa Ohta, President of the Association of Legal Aid Attorneys, UAW Local 2325**

“Over thirty years ago this month, the Supreme Court established a constitutional right to quality legal representation for individuals accused of a crime. Today, public defense is one of the most noble callings in the legal professions, and at NYCDS, we are proud to attract some of the greatest legal advocates in the country to work in this field. Sadly, many of those who join our ranks leave us, not because they don’t love their work, not because they have lost the passion and zeal that the job requires, but because they simply cannot afford to maintain a humble, middle class lifestyle on the salaries we provide, and under the crushing burden of the student loan debts they incurred to enter this field in the first place. This is a conscious decision that our government makes. We are asking our NYS elected leaders to live up to the ideals of *Gideon v. Wainwright*, and at the very least, offer those in public defense the student loan assistance they need simply to make ends meet,” said **Stan Germán, Executive Director of New York County Defender Services**.

"Relieving those who work in public interest from the crushing debt associated with achieving the degrees required to do so is a moral imperative. Public Defenders and 18-b counsel often leave school with the same debt

load as their ‘big law’ colleagues, only to find that they are required to work side hustles to make ends meet. Furthermore, due to relatively low salaries, newly minted lawyers often eschew the public interest sector in favor of higher paying jobs, jeopardizing recruitment and retention efforts of those organizations mandated to serve the most vulnerable populations,” said **Kevin Stadelmaier, New York State Association of Criminal Defense Lawyers**. “For these reasons, we strongly urge the Legislature to pass HESC/DALF this year, and to extend the same not only to Public Defenders, but to those essential private practitioners discharging the same important work on our 18-b panels.”

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