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37 District Attorneys, Public Defender Organizations, and Unions Sign Letter in Support of Expanded Eligibility, Increased Funding for Legislation to Increase Student Loan Aid for Attorneys Serving the Public Interest

(NEW YORK, NY) - 37 district attorneys, public defender organizations, and unions signed onto a [letter calling](#) on Governor Kathy Hochul to lead the fight to protect student borrowers and ensure the inclusion of funding in the proposed Executive Fiscal Year 2026 (FY26) budget for [legislation](#) 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.

In the letter, coalition members urged Governor Hochul to allocate \$4 million in the proposed Executive FY26 Budget to fund the modest expansion of this crucial loan assistance program for public defenders, public interest attorneys and prosecutors across New York.

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](#).

The letter states:

“As we head into 2025 the fate of federal student loan programs is once again at great risk. Public interest loan forgiveness programs and reduced payment monthly plans have been attacked. If these programs are curtailed in the coming year, loan payments could increase by hundreds of dollars per month. For those who took on significant amounts of student debt to complete a professional degree to serve the public interest, the prospect of

debt cancellation could be completely out of reach.

This tumultuous moment calls for New York to lead the way in protecting student borrowers working in the public interest by strengthening and expanding the HESC-DALF program. By including HESC-DALF in the FY26 budget and passing it into law, New York can ensure that public interest jobs attract and retain a diversity of people dedicated to public service as a long and lasting career.”

“The need for dedicated and experienced public interest attorneys who can provide essential legal services for hundreds of thousands of low-income New Yorkers is critical, now more than ever,” said **Twyla Carter, Attorney-in-Chief and Chief Executive Officer at The Legal Aid Society**. “But crippling high student loan payments, coupled with the ever-increasing cost of living in New York City, continue to pose a significant threat to the ability of these attorneys to remain in the public sector. The inclusion of additional funding for student loan forgiveness in the FY26 Executive Budget will provide much-needed relief for attorneys and allow them to continue their zealous advocacy on behalf of the individuals and communities who need it most.”

"Vulnerable New Yorkers will rely on legal services organizations to protect their rights more than ever in the days to come. Our union members need relief from rising student loan payments so they can stay in their jobs, representing clients in need," said **Lisa Ohta, President of UAW Local 2325, Association of Legal Aid Attorneys**. "New York has the opportunity to lead the way in supporting workers in this essential industry, ensuring our courts run and New Yorkers have access to justice."

“District Attorney’s Offices across the state have been experiencing a crisis when it comes to recruitment and retention," said **Michael E. McMahon, Richmond County District Attorney and President of the District Attorneys Association of the State of New York**. "The combination of lower public service salaries and a constantly increasing cost of living leads to talented practitioners leaving our offices for the private sector. Increasing the amount of student loan repayment assistance provided by DALF will make a big impact on incentivizing assistant district attorneys to continue using their talents to serve the public interest."

“At a time when retention and recruitment is so challenging this will be a great help to bringing and keeping top talent to the criminal justice system.” said **Tony Jordan, Washington County District Attorney**.

“Expanding student loan forgiveness for public interest attorneys is an investment in justice for all New Yorkers, said **Laurette Mulry, Attorney In Charge of The Legal Aid Society of Suffolk County**. By easing the financial burden on those who dedicate their careers to serving our communities, Governor Hochul has a unique opportunity to strengthen access to justice for the most vulnerable among us. Including this funding in the Executive Budget proposal is not just a commitment to public service; it’s a commitment to equity and fairness in our state.”

“New Yorkers facing incarceration, family separation, eviction, and other serious harms in the legal system rely on the zealous representation provided by attorneys who have devoted their careers to public service,” said **Lisa Schreibersdorf, Executive Director of Brooklyn Defender Services**. “However, high student loan burdens and rising costs of living make it difficult for experienced lawyers to stay in public interest positions. The expansion of the HESC/DALF program has never been more critical to ensure attorneys can continue to serve New Yorkers in need.”

Karen J. Freedom, Lawyers for Children, said “Debt relief for attorneys working in public interest positions is a critical step in ensuring equal access to justice for all New Yorkers.

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The Legal Aid Society exists for one simple yet powerful reason: to ensure that New Yorkers are not denied their right to equal justice because of poverty. For over 145 years, we have protected, defended, and advocated for those who have struggled in silence for far too long. Every day, in every borough, The Legal Aid Society changes the lives of our clients and helps improve our communities. www.legalaidnyc.org