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Public Defenders, District Attorneys, Indigent Legal Services Providers, and Labor Unions Hold Press Conference to Call for Expansion of Student Loan Assistance in FY27 Budget

More Than 60 Organizations Across the State Sign Letter to Governor Hochul and NYS Legislature in Support of Legislation to Increase Aid for Attorneys Serving the Public Interest

(ALBANY, NY) — A coalition of public defenders, district attorneys, indigent legal service providers, and labor unions held a press conference today to call on Governor Kathy Hochul and the New York State Legislature to include in the New York State Fiscal Year 2027 (FY27) budget [funding](#) to bolster the Higher Education Services Corporation (HESC) and District Attorney and Indigent Legal Services Attorney Loan Forgiveness (DALF) program, which provide student loan assistance for attorneys serving the public interest.

More than 60 members also signed onto a [letter](#) thanking New York State Senate Majority Leader Andrea Stewart-Cousins and New York State Assembly Speaker Carl Heastie for including the legislation in their one-house bills and calling on Governor Hochul to join the legislature in including in the final FY27 budget the additional \$4 million dollars needed to fund the modest expansion of the HESC/DALF program and adopt the legislative framework for the expansion.

In recent years, public defender and district attorney offices across the state have suffered from high rates of attrition due to low salaries and high law school debt burdens that make it difficult for attorneys to remain in vital public interest roles that serve fellow New Yorkers.

When these attorneys turn to private sector jobs, New Yorkers in need of their services are left behind as offices deal with larger caseloads and fewer experienced attorneys. The subsequent delays as new attorneys or prosecutors are assigned exacerbates court backlogs and prevents New Yorkers from receiving the speedy access to justice they deserve.

The coalition also emphasized that, given the volatility of the federal landscape regarding loan forgiveness and repayment options, this modest but crucial investment is needed now more than ever to ensure that New York continues to attract and retain talented individuals to work in the public interest.

“Public defenders and prosecutors are essential to ensuring that our justice system works fairly and efficiently for every New Yorker,” said **New York State Senator Jessica Ramos**. “Yet too many talented attorneys are forced to leave public service because the burden of student loan debt makes these careers financially unsustainable. Expanding the HESC/DALF program is a practical investment in the people who uphold our justice system every day and who stand with our most vulnerable communities. By increasing loan assistance, we can help recruit and retain the dedicated public servants our communities rely on and ensure that access to justice does not depend on whether offices can keep experienced attorneys on staff.”

"New York's public interest attorneys and assistant district attorneys are the backbone of our justice system, yet they are being crushed by a mountain of student debt that far outpaces their salaries," said **New York State Assemblymember Jo Anne Simon**. "This modest expansion of the student loan program ensures the stability of our courts and that talented public defenders and prosecutors can afford to stay in the careers they love. It also ensures our communities receive the experienced representation they deserve. I'm proud to sponsor this bill and I urge my colleagues and the Governor to include this measure in our final state budget."

"When our offices lose experienced attorneys to the private sector simply because they cannot afford to stay in public service, it is the people we serve — vulnerable, low-income New Yorkers — who pay the price through case delays, court backlogs, and strained resources," said **Twyla Carter, Attorney-in-Chief and Chief Executive Officer at The Legal Aid Society**. "We urge Governor Hochul, Majority Leader Stewart-Cousins, and Speaker Heastie to prioritize funding for this modest, bipartisan expansion of the HESC and DALF programs to ensure that a career in public service remains desirable and sustainable for all those committed to this essential work."

Manhattan District Attorney Alvin Bragg, Jr., said: "Crippling student loan debt is a barrier for entry and retention for those New Yorkers who want to dedicate their careers to serving the public. Bolstering student loan forgiveness for this wide swath of public servants would greatly benefit New Yorkers in the City and across the state."

"Student loans are a major factor in the shortage of public defense and civil legal services attorneys," said **Susan C. Bryant, Executive Director of the New York State Defenders Association**. "The existing District Attorney and Indigent Legal Services Attorney Loan Forgiveness Program has provided crucial support to public service lawyers, but the State's failure to expand the program's eligibility rules and properly fund that expansion is hindering efforts to ensure a sufficient pool of qualified candidates for these positions and the retention of those lawyers beyond their first couple of years of practice. Changes to the federal loan forgiveness program make the expansion of the state's program more important than ever. This year's budget must expand the program's current eligibility and payment provisions and increase funding by \$4 million. The Legislature and the Governor must act now before New York is unable to meet its constitutional obligation to provide counsel to those who cannot afford it."

"The adage 'personnel is policy' is as true for law enforcement as any profession," said **District Attorney Susan Cacace of Westchester County**. "Without adequate staffing, our agencies develop backlogs that draw out the processing of criminal cases and delay justice for victims. This bill would target one of the most effective incentives for staff retention, and I urge its passage during this legislative session. There is no justice system without the people who make that system work."

"Public service attorneys carry enormous responsibility for the safety and fairness of our communities. Expanding loan assistance helps ensure that talented lawyers can afford to serve as prosecutors, public defenders and legal services attorneys, and remain in those roles for the long term," said **Wayne County District Attorney Christine K. Callanan**.

"New Yorkers deserve the best public service legal talent," said **Julie Cianca, Monroe County Public Defender**. "Loan forgiveness is a necessity if we are to remain competitive."

"If we are to have any hope of attracting the new lawyers who would choose to dedicate themselves to the vitally important work of making a more fair criminal justice system, we must increase the amount of financial support and the length of time it is available to make that honorable choice a realistic one," said **Wayne County Public Defender Andrew D. Correia**.

"The District Attorneys Association of the State of New York (DAASNY) is committed to helping district attorneys' offices recruit and retain qualified staff," said **Rensselaer County District Attorney and President**

of the District Attorneys Association of the State of New York Mary Pat Donnelly. “The New York State District Attorney and Indigent Legal Services Attorney Loan Forgiveness (DALF) Program helps ease some of the burden of student loans for prosecutors and public defenders, DAASNY has long advocated for an increase in funding for the DALF program and an increase in the amount of loan forgiveness to individual borrowers. This would help ensure that public service attorneys who provide critical and legally mandated services are financially able to remain in their roles. I urge Governor Hochul and our legislature to include this funding in the FY 27 Budget.”

“Essential public legal positions, including defense attorneys for the indigent and prosecutors, typically offer lower salaries than the private legal sector,” said **Kathleen Dougherty, Executive Director of the Onondaga County Assigned Counsel Program.** “As a result, the ability to hire and retain staff attorneys is a never-ending battle. Loan forgiveness is a significant way to bridge this financial gap and make essential, lower-paying roles into sustainable careers for those lawyers who wish to serve in these roles.”

“When student loan debt drives talented attorneys out of public defense, it is our clients and our courts who suffer,” said **Stan Germán, Executive Director of New York County Defender Services and President of the Chief Defenders Association of New York.** “Expanding and properly funding HESC/DALF is a practical, bipartisan step to retain experienced public servants and protect New Yorkers’ constitutional right to counsel. We urge the Governor and Legislature to include this funding in the FY27 budget.”

Brooklyn District Attorney Eric Gonzalez said, “When law school debt is crushing and the cost of living keeps rising, public service becomes a financial gamble that too many talented lawyers simply cannot afford to take. New York needs experienced public defenders and prosecutors who can stay, grow, and build lasting trust with the communities they serve. Expanding the DALF program is a smart, targeted investment in a justice system that treats people fairly, promotes public safety, and strengthens trust in our institutions. I urge Governor Hochul and the Legislature to include this funding in the FY27 budget.”

Susan M. Howard, Orleans County District Attorney, said, “Recruiting and retaining lawyers in our offices is key to our work, and this program will be priceless!”

“This legislation is long overdue and critical to attracting and retaining talented lawyers engaged in public service,” said **Washington County District Attorney J. Anthony Jordan.**

“The District Attorney and Indigent Legal Services Attorney Loan Forgiveness Program plays a vital role in helping DA offices recruit and retain talented ADAs, but the \$3,400 annual cap has not kept pace with the realities of today's student loan burden,” said **Albany County District Attorney Lee Kindlon.** “Increasing this cap would send a clear message that New York values the prosecutors and public defenders who dedicate their careers to public service, and would go a long way toward ensuring that financial hardship does not drive talented attorneys away from these critical roles.”

“Recruiting and retaining high quality prosecutors is challenging under the best of circumstances,” said **Jason MacBride, Ontario County District Attorney.** “Rewarding them with student loan forgiveness relief provides an incentive that overcomes the allure of private practice. I wholly endorse this measure.”

“Student debt bills take from the wage gains our members win at the bargaining table and prevent them from building wealth and retirement security. This is an untenable situation that the Trump administration is turning into a full-blown crisis with rollbacks to federal debt relief. New York has the opportunity to fight back here,” said **Brandon Mancilla, UAW Region 9A Director.** “UAW represents over 90% of unionized legal services workers in New York and expansion of HESC DALF awards is a critical issue for us. We call on Governor Hochul, Majority Leader Stewart-Cousins and Speaker Heastie to make good on their promises to stand with labor and the UAW and to ensure our members can afford to stay in New York and bring true justice to the working class.”

“Public defense attorneys and prosecutors alike answer a call to serve the public interest, often at great personal financial sacrifice,” said **Laurette Mulry, Attorney-In-Charge, Legal Aid Society of Suffolk County**. “For this reason, we urge the Governor to include a modest expansion of funding for the HESC-DALF public interest attorney loan forgiveness program in the FY27 budget. This enhancement will prove to be a critical investment in justice that will yield significant returns for our communities and justice system. Far too many talented lawyers are burdened by staggering law school debt that delays starting a family, buying a home, and building stable lives in the communities they serve. By strengthening this program, we ensure that dedicated attorneys can pursue careers in public service without being forced to choose between their commitment to justice and their financial future. Supporting HESC-DALF expansion is not just support for lawyers, it is support for the fairness and integrity of our entire legal system.”

“Our members at UAW Local 2325 rely on HESC DALF to stay in jobs they love, but the program has failed to keep pace with the skyrocketing cost of living in this state. Rent, childcare, utilities, and student loan bills have all gone up since 2009, but HESC DALF has stayed flat. This is unacceptable,” said **Lisa Ohta, President of the Association of Legal Advocates and Attorneys/UAW Local 2325**. “An increase to the annual award and the years of eligibility would ensure our members have the financial stability they need to keep fighting for the most vulnerable communities in our state who need our representation now more than ever.”

Patrick Perfetti, Cortland County District Attorney, said, “In this time of strained recruitment and retention, this measure is vital to maintaining strong staffing levels in our Offices.”

“Every day, our attorneys stand with and defend people who face life-altering consequences of the legal system: incarceration, deportation, and family separation,” said **Lisa Schreibersdorf, Executive Director of Brooklyn Defender Services**. “These attorneys have made a profound commitment to public service — one that shouldn't require them to choose between the people they serve and their own financial security. The expansion of the HESC/DALF program is a modest but essential investment in the attorneys who show up for New Yorkers when it matters most.”

“As public defenders in the Bronx, we represent people navigating systems that tear families and communities apart and trap them in cycles of perpetual punishment. Our ability to attract and retain high-quality talent directly determines how fiercely we can wage that fight, and increasing funding to HESC/DALF is a critical tool that helps us keep excellent advocates in public service,” said **Juval O. Scott, Executive Director of The Bronx Defenders**.

“Expanding loan assistance for public-interest attorneys is a smart investment in closing the justice gap, helping ensure that talented lawyers can continue serving low-income New Yorkers instead of being driven out of public service by crushing student debt,” said **Shervon Small, Executive Director of Legal Services NYC**.

“HESC/DALF is an absolute necessity for the recruitment and retention of the talent required to discharge the important responsibilities that come with representing the indigent in both criminal and family court,” said **Kevin Stadelmaier, Esq., President of the New York State Association of Criminal Defense Lawyers**. “NYSACDL is proud to support HESC/DALF in order to ensure that NYS institutional providers can continue to provide the highest quality representation to our most deserving populations.”

“Crushing law school debt is a burden forcing legal advocates to leave public interest for the private sector,” said **Raymond A. Tierney, Suffolk County District Attorney**. “We are asking Governor Hochul and legislative leaders to implement this bipartisan solution to fix the loan assistance program to keep prosecutors and public defenders in our courtrooms where they are needed.”

Background:

The [modest expansion](#) of the HESC/DALF program, if passed in the FY27 budget, would increase student loan aid for public interest lawyers 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. Under the current program, public interest attorneys and district attorneys can only receive up to \$20,400 in total loan assistance – despite an [estimate](#) from the American Bar Association finding that lawyers graduate with an average debt of \$130,000.

Moreover, public interest attorneys and district attorneys lag behind both licensed registered nurses, who graduate with an [average debt](#) of \$55,000 and are eligible for up to \$40,000 in the HESC award, and social workers, who graduate with an [average debt](#) of \$76,000 and are eligible to receive up to \$26,000 in the HESC award.

The HESC/DALF expansion bill will right-size the award program by both expanding the total eligible award and the period of eligibility, allowing attorneys to now apply in their second year of work up until their tenth year when they will presumably be eligible for federal loan cancellation should it still exist.

The bill enjoys robust support from institutional defender offices, civil defender offices, labor unions, and District Attorney offices, and has [passed](#) the NY State Senate with overwhelming bipartisan support for the last three years, never garnering more than one nay vote. Both the Senate One-House and Assembly One-House have included the legislation in their Education, Labor and Family Assistance Bills in part W of S9006-B and part AA of A10006-B.

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The Legal Aid Society is a nonprofit law firm that exists for one simple yet powerful reason: to ensure that New Yorkers are not denied their right to equal justice because of poverty. For 150 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 the people we serve and helps improve our communities.

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