

June 6, 2007

The Honorable Arnold Schwarzenegger
Governor of the State of California
State Capitol Building
Sacramento, CA 95814

Sent via facsimile only to (916) 445-4633

RE: SUPPORT - Budget Allocation for the Assumption Program of Loans for Law in the Public Interest (APLLPI).

Dear Governor Schwarzenegger:

I am writing to express the Disability Rights Legal Center's (DRLC's) strong support for the proposed budget item of \$100,000 that would enable the Student Aid Commission to create an Assumption Program of Loans for Law in the Public Interest (APLLPI).

Since 1975, DRLC's mission has been to promote the rights of people with disabilities and the public interest in and awareness of those rights by providing legal and related services. DRLC is especially dedicated to training the next generation of disability rights advocates. Located on the campuses of Loyola Law School in Los Angeles and the University of LaVerne College of Law in Ontario, DRLC works closely with law student externs. As passionate about public interest law as those students may be, however, the increasing cost of legal education and the debt burden those students carry after graduation makes joining DRLC as staff attorneys impossible for many. Loan repayment is a major reason DRLC finds it difficult to hire new attorneys, as they simply cannot pay their loans on the salaries a non-profit organization like ours can offer.

The APLLPI is an important step toward a solution. It will provide important loan repayment assistance for attorneys who commit to providing legal services to improve the lives of low-income and other disadvantaged Californians for four consecutive years. This program was created by AB 935 (Hertzberg)(2001-2002 session), but has never received funding. AB 171 (Beall) will adjust the existing program slightly to model it more closely after the current successful loan assumption programs for nurses and teachers, as well as ensure that state funds can be supported and leveraged by private donations contributed to the funds administered by the Student Aid Commission.

Law school tuition costs have increased dramatically over the last 20 years, and law students now graduate with unprecedented levels of educational debt. In a recent survey of California legal services attorneys under the age of 35, nearly 90% reported graduating with loan debt; 46% of those with loan debt owe at least \$90,000, and 22% owe over \$120,000 in education-based loans.

While private sector attorney salaries have kept pace with rising law school costs, legal services attorney salaries have not. The median starting salary in nonprofit legal services organizations is \$36,000. This disparity between educational loan debt and salaries makes it difficult for legal services programs, including our organization, to recruit and retain new law school graduates, particularly graduates from diverse backgrounds.

In the survey of California legal services attorneys under the age of 35, more than half reported that they plan to leave their current public interest employment within the next three years. One third even plan to leave within a year or less. They simply cannot afford to stay. The APLLPI Program is an important effort to support both the recruitment and retention of these dedicated public servants, as it is designed to ease the financial burden of choosing a legal career focused on serving the public interest.

Therefore, we respectfully request your support for the \$100,000 for the Student Aid Commission in this year's budget cycle to allow the Commission to develop regulations to implement this important program.

Sincerely,



Eve L. Hill
Executive Director

CC via facsimile:

Chris Kahn, Legislative Secretary, Office of the Governor
Eric Csizner, Deputy Legislative Secretary, Office of the Governor
Assembly member Jim Beall, Attn: John Grams, (916) 319-2124
LAAC, (415)834-0202