

Columbia Legal Services is a statewide legal advocacy organization that works to dismantle and transform the systems that perpetuate poverty and injustice. Our work is informed by the communities we serve across Washington. In 2021, we are asking state policymakers to:

Transform structures that perpetuate injustice

Driven by a motive to profit, for-profit private prisons and detention centers often cut corners. They lack transparency and oversight, leading to inadequate medical care, poor nutrition and mistreatment. Washington should prohibit private for-profit detention in the state.

(HB 1090, Ortiz-Self)

Washington currently prohibits state civil legal services funding for programs that serve people without lawful immigration status. This prohibition is contrary to the state's commitment to protect its residents regardless of immigration status and should be repealed.

(HB 1072, Lekanoff)

Increasing the rate at which people in confinement can earn time off their sentence by participating in positive programming promotes public safety and reentry. Increasing earned time should apply to sentence enhancements and not be limited to "non-violent" offenses.

Remove barriers to reentry

Washington should allow for the complete expungement of juvenile records so that mistakes of youth don't burden a person throughout their lifetime.

Legal financial obligations prevent people from reintegrating back into their communities. Washington should take the next step in reforming its LFO laws to ensure that while they prioritize restitution, they do not continue to prevent individuals from successful reentry.

Respect workers' safety and dignity

The Wage Recovery Act gives low-wage workers who have been victims of wage theft the ability to put a hold (a lien) on their employers' assets.

Protect Washingtonians from the burden of unfair debt

A driver's license is a necessary tool to allow people to drive to work. Washington should end the practice of suspending driver's licenses due to an inability to pay a traffic fine.
(SB 5226, Salomon)

Landlords' unsupported claims of damage to rental units creates a barrier to renters accessing future housing. Washington should require better documentation of repair costs and more clearly define "wear and tear" to prevent excessive claims for routine maintenance.

To prevent unnecessary economic harm as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic, Washington should automatically protect bank accounts from being garnished by debt collectors. The automatic protection should be for enough funds to pay for rent, food, and medical needs.

Support Agenda

Columbia Legal Services supports principles and legislation proposed by community partners and allies that help to advance social, economic, and racial equity for people living in poverty. These include:

Ending mass incarceration

- Ensuring that all sentencing reform legislation be explicitly retroactive.
- Avoiding legislation that promotes the harmful idea that people who have committed “violent” offenses are “unworthy” of and should be categorically excluded from relief.
- Supporting all efforts that will immediately and permanently reduce Washington’s prison population by a significant amount.
- Ending the one-year time limit to collaterally challenge a criminal conviction.
- Allowing for all incarcerated individuals to earn good time credits on their sentences.
- Stopping the use of juvenile conviction history to determine length of adult sentences.
- Promoting robust post-conviction review processes.
- Supporting policies that reduce the likelihood of contact with the criminal legal system.
- Ending solitary confinement.
- Decriminalizing drug possession offenses.
- Preventing landlords from unfairly rejecting potential tenants due to their criminal history.

Promoting immigrant equity

- Increasing eligibility for the children’s health insurance program to age 26, regardless of immigration status.
- Prohibiting retaliation against immigrant farm workers on H-2A visas who try to improve wages or working conditions on the farms where they worked.
- Protecting Washington workers who have lost their jobs but are unable to access unemployment benefits due to their immigration status.

updated January 14, 2021