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**Columbia Legal Services** advocates for laws that advance racial and economic equity in Washington. With our community partners, we are focusing on the following measures this legislative session.

### [Fighting for free communications between people in prison and their families. \(SB 6021\)](#)

People in prison need to make phone calls and use email to keep in touch with their families. Maintaining strong relationships with people outside of prison increases an individual's chances of successful reentry after release. However, the high cost of phone calls and email messages—one of many economic injustices in prison—greatly limits people's ability to stay connected and share information. The Washington Department of Corrections (DOC) contracts with private company Securus Technologies to provide all phone call and email services to people in custody. Driven by profits (which it shares with DOC), Securus charges extremely high fees to connect people in prison with those outside, even to talk with their own children. CLS is working with a coalition to make phone calls and email messages in Washington prisons free.

### [Protecting farmworker wages through better data. \(SB 5996/HB 2226\)](#)

More than 30,000 people from Mexico and Central America come to Washington state each year on H-2A visas to work on farms. Employers who use the H-2A temporary agricultural visa program are required to pay their employees—whether they are H-2A workers or local workers—wages equal to those in the open labor market. This requirement is intended to prevent employers from paying as little as possible to workers from other countries and driving wages down for all workers. However, among many problems related to the H-2A program, the process for determining the “prevailing wage” is based entirely on information provided by employers and has resulted in harvest wages 20-50% lower than the true market rate. We need to include farmworkers - not just their employers - in the wage survey collected by Washington State's Employment Security Department (ESD). This bill would improve the H-2A worker wage survey and allow ESD to gather more data on the actual number and location of workers in Washington on an H-2A visa.

### [Protecting the rights of people who shelter in their vehicles. \(Bill # TBD\)](#)

As the homelessness crisis continues to worsen, more and more people are being forced to live in their vehicles. CLS client, Steven Long, was living in his truck when the City of Seattle impounded it, cutting him off from his shelter and the tools he needed for work. He could not pay the \$547 in fines required to keep his truck from being auctioned off and lost it permanently. In a landmark 2021 decision, the Washington Supreme Court sided with Mr. Long and held that the constitution prohibits fines that deprive people of their means of living. The Court also held that Washington's Homestead Act protects vehicles used as a primary residence from forced sale. Unfortunately,

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courts around the state continue to impose fines that people living in their vehicles can't pay, leading to their homes being illegally auctioned off. CLS seeks to codify the holding in Long to ensure the rights of people who shelter in their vehicles are protected as required by law.

### [Supporting immigrant equity in state programs. \(Budget proviso\)](#)

Last year, the legislature funded health care coverage for people in Washington who can't access Medicaid due to their immigration status. This was major progress, yet the funding wasn't enough to cover all eligible people in Washington. This year, we are seeking funding to cover more eligible people, and a plan to cover all eligible Washingtonians going forward. We also continue to push for state-funded unemployment insurance for Washington workers ineligible for federal unemployment insurance due to their immigration status (SB 5109/HB 1095). We will be asking the fiscal legislative committees to consider how to fairly fund such a program, and to consider how much employers are already paying into the unemployment system for workers who cannot access it.

### [Protecting tenants from unfair and deceptive practices by landlords \(HB 2114/SB 5961\)](#)

The Consumer Protection Act is a powerful tool for Washington consumers who have been harmed by unfair or deceptive business practices. But tenants who have been harmed by their landlords' business practices cannot make use of that tool, because landlords aren't subject to Washington's consumer protection laws. When landlords charge fees that aren't covered in a lease, unfairly deny the return of security deposits, or increase rent suddenly and without proper notice, it can put low-income tenants at risk of losing their housing. These bills ensure that tenants can exercise their rights to challenge these unfair and deceptive practices by extending the umbrella of the Consumer Protection Act to cover important parts of the landlord/tenant relationship.

### [Promoting oversight of local jails. \(SB 6189\)](#)

Columbia Legal Services has long advocated to protect the dignity, safety, and rights of people held in jails across Washington. Our 2019 report, "Gone But Not Forgotten", exposed the high number of deaths in Washington's jails over a 10-year period and urged better oversight and reporting requirements for state jails as a life-saving measure. Now, along with the Joint Legislative Task Force on Jail Standards, we are asking the legislature to ensure that the health, safety, and dignity of people in Washington's jails are monitored and protected by an independent oversight agency. This bill would codify the task force's recommendations and create consistent, uniform data collection to increase transparency and accountability in the operation of local jails.

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