

Columbia Legal Services is a non-profit civil legal aid organization based in Washington state. We advocate for laws that advance social, economic, and racial equity for people living in poverty. We provide legal assistance, including class actions and policy advocacy, to people who cannot access federally funded legal services due to government restrictions. Our priorities for the 2025 state legislative session include:

### **Fighting for free communications between people in prison and their families.**

*SB 5231 (Hansen) / HB 1301 (Peterson)*

People in prison need to make phone calls and use electronic messaging 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 e-messages greatly limits people's ability to stay connected and share information. CLS is working with the Connecting Families Washington coalition to make calls and e-messages in Washington prisons free.

### **Protecting the rights of people who shelter in their vehicles.**

*HB 1240 (Peterson)*

As the homelessness crisis continues to worsen, more and more people are being forced to live in their vehicles. Even after a Washington Supreme Court decision protected the rights of people sheltering in their vehicles (*Seattle v. Long*, 2021), courts around the state are failing to respect those protections. CLS seeks to codify the *Long* decision to ensure the rights of people who shelter in their vehicles are protected as required by law.

### **Establishing independent oversight of Washington jails.**

*SB 5005 (Saldaña) / HB 1424 (Obras)*

Washington jails are in crisis: according to the latest Justice Department statistics, Washington state has the fourth highest rate of jail deaths in the United States. We are working with a coalition of impacted people and families who lost loved ones in jails to fight for a new, independent state agency that will establish standards for jail conditions, monitor jails, and make jails more transparent and accountable to the public.

### **Requiring reasonable regulation of the use of public spaces.**

*HB 1380 (Gregerson)*

Arresting or fining people for sleeping in public spaces only worsens Washington's homelessness crisis and diverts resources that are needed to address the root causes. Cities and counties should take into account the safety and welfare of unsheltered people when passing ordinances governing public spaces. People with no other options must be able to safely keep warm and dry.

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## **Improving health and safety for people held in private detention facilities.**

*HB 1232 (Ortiz-Self)*

People confined in private detention facilities are denied basic human rights like nutrition, hygiene, safety, and basic medical care. State inspection and regulation of private detention facilities is necessary to ensure the health and safety of people detained. CLS is working with a coalition to allow the state Department of Health to conduct routine, unannounced inspections of facilities for health and safety violations and to assess civil penalties for non-compliance.

## **Supporting immigrant equity in state programs.**

The Apple Health expansion program has helped to provide health care coverage for 12,000 Washingtonians who can't access Medicaid due to their immigration status. However, the program was capped due to limited funding and thousands of eligible low-income Washingtonians were unable to get covered. We are seeking funding to cover all eligible Washingtonians. We also continue to push for state-funded unemployment insurance for Washington workers ineligible for federal unemployment insurance due to their immigration status.

## **GUIDING PRINCIPLES**


In addition, CLS supports legislation that follows these guiding principles:

- That all efforts to reduce long sentencing be made retroactive. If the state finds a sentence length unjust, it should remedy the unjust sentences already imposed.
- That no legislation should promote the harmful idea that people who have committed "violent" offenses are "unworthy" of and should be categorically excluded from relief.
- That the juvenile rehabilitation system is not intertwined with the adult criminal system. Children are different.
- That workers regardless of their immigration status be treated with dignity and protected from workplace hazards, retaliation, and sexual harassment and violence.
- That governments should not address homelessness through the criminal legal system.
- That immigration detention be phased out completely and, until then, that people held in detention not be denied basic human rights to dignity, safety, and health.

### **FOR MORE INFORMATION CONTACT**

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