

## The Law Office of Alison B. Jensen

PO Box 40001 | Denver, CO 80204

ajensenGAL@gmail.com

303-501-0531

TO: House Judiciary Committee

FROM: Alison B. Jensen

RE: Testimony in favor of HB24-1374

DATE: March 26, 2024

I am an attorney contractor with The Office of the Child’s Representative (“OCR”) and am submitting my written testimony in favor of HB41-1374. I am testifying about the impact qualifying for Federal Public Service Loan Forgiveness as a state contractor would have on Colorado’s court-involved children and youth, and on those who represent them.

I have been a children’s lawyer through the OCR for 10 years, working primarily in Denver County. In 2008, I left a career in public relations to attend law school at the University of Colorado with the specific aim of using my law degree to support vulnerable children and their families. I moved to Colorado not only because of CU Law’s Juvenile and Family Law Program but also because of the numerous opportunities to learn about juvenile law in the state that is home to one of the country’s first dedicated juvenile courts, the National Association of Counsel for Children, and the OCR – a state agency focused entirely on providing high-quality legal representation to children and youth. During and after law school I had the opportunity to work in the courts and for a number of children and family-focused legal organizations, which solidified my commitment to this work, and to Colorado’s court-involved children and youth.

Of course, to become a children’s legal advocate in Colorado, a law degree is required. There is no shortcut. I graduated law school in 2011 with nearly \$150,000 in student debt, even after two years of in-state tuition. The cost of living in Colorado has increased every year since my graduation. My current loan payments are around \$1,200 per month, which amounts to a substantial contribution to a mortgage payment or a monthly childcare bill. As state contractors, we earn substantially less than our counterparts at law firms. Because we are self-employed, most of us pay for our own health and malpractice insurance, technology equipment, and office expenses. We run our own small businesses, doing bookkeeping, taxes, office administration, and more, for no additional pay.

Aside from the financial implications of being a state-paid attorney contractor, this work is hard. We attend early morning meetings and visit children in the evenings and on weekends, at home, in foster care, at school, and in jail. We regularly address with children and their families difficult topics like abuse, neglect, trauma, poverty, incarceration, domestic violence, substance abuse




disorders, mental illness, and deportation. We liaise with numerous state and government agencies, schools, shelters, detention facilities, and police. We sometimes stand alone in court, for days at a time or across a span of months, fighting for what is right for a child or young person. And we care deeply about these children and their families. It is not work that we leave behind when we walk out the courthouse doors.

Yet, I currently do not qualify for Federal Public Service Loan Forgiveness solely because of my contractor status, though 100 percent of my income is paid by the State of Colorado via my contract with the OCR. I have applied for Federal Public Service Loan Forgiveness numerous times, and even once was accepted, only to have that acceptance withdrawn due to this technicality. It was devastating to experience the joy of acceptance and then have the rug pulled out from under me with a rejection letter months later. As the Committee is aware, Colorado relies primarily on independent contractors for the state to provide legal services for court-involved children and youth. For those of us dedicated to serving children and families in this capacity, this is the only way we can do it. We are appointed by the courts and paid by the state. There is no government office already providing these services. We cannot be retained by private individuals, because this is very clearly public service work.

The stated purpose of the Federal Public Service Loan Forgiveness Program was “to encourage individuals to enter and continue in full-time public service employment.” However, the fact that Colorado’s attorney contractors do not qualify for the program is a barrier to both of these goals. Given the huge amount of debt carried by many of us doing public interest legal work as contractors, it could be appealing to choose a different path – to leave this career for a non-profit or a government position; to move away from Colorado and do this work as a government employee in another state; or even to quit public service entirely for a career in the private sector where it would be easier to pay off our debt. Public Service Loan Forgiveness would be an immense and sustaining support for those of us committed to serving youth and the public good through this role. We also need to encourage passionate, dedicated attorneys to *enter* this field. Given rising costs of living and tuition, it will become more difficult to recruit future children’s lawyers in Colorado if there is no pathway to federal loan forgiveness. Our state’s youth deserve legal representatives who have the capacity to develop and use their expertise in juvenile law. Federal Public Service Loan Forgiveness would go a long way in supporting us to do our best work for Colorado and its children.

Thank you, Chairman Weissman and Members of the House Judiciary Committee, for reading my testimony. I very much appreciate your consideration.



Alison B. Jensen

**House Judiciary**

**03/26/2024 01:30 PM**

**HB24-1374 Judicial Contractor Loan Forgiveness Eligibility**

**Typed Text of Testimony Submitted**

<b>Name, Position, Representing</b>	<b>Typed Text of Testimony</b>
Sara Wynes For themselves	Please put into law HB24-1374. Those of us Colorado attorneys who work at a reduced rate in order to serve our state and its residents (as independent contractors), representing children and their best interests, deserve a chance at student loan forgiveness. We attorneys make a choice to serve the children in our communities, at a highly reduced rate. We do so because the work is important and rewarding. We struggle, though, making a living and paying our exorbitant student loan debts (even from in-state law schools). There needs to be motivation, incentive, and compensation for law school graduates to make the choice to serve the state of Colorado as an independent contractor CFY/GAL/CLR. Forgiveness of law school debt is one way to further compensate us selfless practitioners. Thank you for your consideration.