

## **APPENDIX B: Debtor Example Scenario**

On January 3, 2022, Jane Smith filed a chapter 7 bankruptcy case in Maryland. She later filed a complaint to seek to discharge approximately \$26,000 in student loans. The complaint and summons were served on February 12, 2022. In the complaint, Ms. Smith pleads that her student loan debt should be discharged because requiring payment will cause an “undue hardship” for her and her ten-year-old daughter, Sarah. Ms. Smith’s bankruptcy attorney forwards a signed Attestation to the Department Attorney with a copy of Ms. Smith’s 2020 tax return. (She has not yet completed the 2021 return.) Pursuant to the Guidance, the Department Attorney would evaluate the information provided in the Attestation as follows to determine if the facts in Ms. Smith’s case justify stipulating that she has shown an undue hardship within the meaning of Section 523(a)(8) of the Bankruptcy Code.

### *Part I: Personal Information*

Part I of Ms. Smith’s Attestation lists relevant background information. It shows that she lives in Baltimore County, Maryland, in a household consisting of herself (age 30) and her daughter (age 10). She lists a student loan balance of \$26,369 and indicates her loan has been in default since June 2012. Part I also shows that Ms. Smith incurred her student loans to attend John Doe Community College, seeking a nursing degree, but that Ms. Smith left school in December 2010 and did not receive a degree. Ms. Smith is currently employed as a nursing assistant at Baltimore County Hospital in Baltimore.

### *Part II: Present Ability to Pay*

Ms. Smith provided information about her income and expenses in Part II of the Attestation. Ms. Smith has reported on her Attestation that she earns \$3900 per month and has current monthly expenses of \$3782, including \$600 that is deducted from her paycheck for taxes, Medicare, Social Security, and health insurance. Ms. Smith has indicated that she resides in inadequate housing and needs to incur additional housing expenses to achieve a minimal standard of living which will increase her total expenses by \$800 (for a total expense amount of \$4582). Below are the steps the Department attorney, in consultation with Education, takes in analyzing Ms. Smith’s income and expenses:

- (1) The Department attorney checks Ms. Smith’s submitted tax return to determine if it is consistent with her stated monthly gross income (\$3900). Ms. Smith has not yet filed her 2021 tax return, so the only income the Department attorney can review is from her 2020 return. That return shows Adjusted Gross Income of \$45,952. This amount divided by 12 is \$3829, a monthly average which is consistent with (and

slightly less) than the \$3900 Ms. Smith has listed on the Attestation. The income stated on the Attestation thus appears correct.<sup>1</sup>

(2) The Department attorney should use the IRS standards to determine Ms. Smith's allowable expenses:

- (a) Payroll deductions. Ms. Smith's payroll deductions of \$600 are almost certainly allowable. She has deducted \$400 for taxes, Medicare, and Social Security expenses, which are generally allowed under the IRS Standards, and the Department attorney should accept the amount of tax withholdings as an expense unless there is an obvious pattern of over withholding. In general, excessive withholding will be accompanied by a significant tax refund; however, Ms. Smith's most recent tax refund is \$3000<sup>2</sup> (which averages to a hypothetical \$250 in monthly income) an amount which is not significant. Accordingly, there is no basis to conclude that Ms. Smith has engaged in excessive withholding.

Ms. Smith's payroll deduction for health insurance of \$200 (Line 15(a)(vi)) is also almost certainly allowable. The Department attorney should generally allow health insurance expenses (whether payroll deductions or not) as long as the debtor indicates the policy covers only family members and not others. Here, Ms. Smith has indicated this on Line 15(a)(vi), and the deduction therefore appears appropriate.

- (b) Living Expenses (National and Local Standards).

Line 14 of the Attestation asks the debtor to confirm whether certain expenses are within amounts allowed under the IRS National Standards. Here, Ms. Smith has confirmed that her household monthly expenses do not exceed the allowed amounts for the following categories, and the Department attorney should allow the full amount for these categories (for a household of two):

Food: \$779  
Housekeeping supplies: \$82  
Apparel & Services: \$161  
Personal care products and services: \$82  
Miscellaneous: \$306

---

<sup>1</sup> The Department attorney may request further corroboration if necessary, for example, where a debtor's bankruptcy filings in total reflect unexplained inconsistencies.

<sup>2</sup> The Department attorney may review the debtor's most recent tax return to assess whether a listed refund suggests potential over-withholding.

Ms. Smith has indicated that her uninsured medical costs are \$150, an amount which exceeds the IRS allowed amount of \$75. However, she has explained that her daughter requires medication and an inhaler, and the total cost not covered by insurance is \$150. Because Ms. Smith has reasonably explained why she needs this excess expense in order to meet her daughter’s health care needs, she should be allowed her actual expense amount of \$150.

Ms. Smith’s total expense amount for the categories identified in Line 14 is \$1560.

Lines 15(d) and (e) of the Attestation allow the debtor to list living expenses in categories corresponding to the IRS Local Standards. The following chart compares Ms. Smith’s listed expenses to those allowed under the Local Standards for a family of two based on her locality. The final column shows the amount—typically, the lesser of the IRS Local Standards expense and Ms. Smith’s actual expense in the category—that the Department attorney may treat as allowed, unless the Department attorney finds the higher amount within specific categories is justified.

<b>Expense</b>	<b>Ms. Smith’s Actual Expense</b>	<b>IRS Allowed Amount</b>	<b>Department Attorney Allowed Amount</b>
Housing & Utilities	\$765	\$2233	\$765
Vehicle Payments	\$400	\$588	\$400
Average costs of operating vehicles	\$350	\$307	\$307
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>\$3290</b>	<b>\$4232</b>	<b>\$1472</b>

Ms. Smith’s actual expenses in each category other than “vehicle operating costs” are less than the amount allowed by the IRS Local Standards. Accordingly, they are consistent with a minimal standard of living. Ms. Smith exceeds the IRS Local Standards amount for vehicle operating costs. The Department attorney should generally limit the debtor’s allowable expenses to the IRS Standard expenses amount, unless allowing the additional expenses is warranted by the debtor’s circumstances.<sup>3</sup>

- (c) Other Necessary Expenses. Line 15(f) allows a debtor to list expenses consistent with the IRS Other Necessary Expenses categories. Ms. Smith has listed only one expense, \$150 per month for babysitting, day care or

---

<sup>3</sup> The Department attorney may ask the debtor to provide an explanation for any expenses over the standard expense amount, but the Department attorney need not do so where, as shown below, the debtor’s aggregate expenses as limited still show an inability to make student loan payments.

Also available as part of the eCourse

[Hooked on CLE: March 2023](#)

First appeared as part of the conference materials for the  
41<sup>st</sup> Annual Jay L. Westbrook Bankruptcy Conference session  
"Student Loans"