

To: House Committee on Judiciary, 2013 Oregon Legislature

From: Rakeem Washington

Date: April 9, 2013

Re: Support for HB 3463 – Parity for Public Defenders

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Chair Barker and Members of the Committee:

My name is Rakeem Washington and I was a staff attorney at Youth, Rights & Justice from 2008-2011 and a law clerk for two years before that. I represented children, youth and parents in the juvenile court system. I worked full-time and currently carried roughly 90 open cases. I support HB 2463 and want to thank the members of this committee, Representatives Williamson, Tomei, Hicks and Garrett, who sponsored this bill.

The work public defenders do is very difficult. At YRJ, virtually all of the cases involve child abuse or neglect. The families experience domestic violence, substance abuse, intergenerational poverty and other serious risk factors. It is exhausting and heartbreaking work. The caseloads are too high and the pay is too low. My passion of working with and for children kept me working despite the low salary.

**I loved my work at YRJ, but I left because I could not afford to repay law school loans at the salary I earned.** I left undergraduate school with virtually no debt. I worked throughout law school to defer costs and sought scholarships as often as possible. My law school's Public Interest Law Project and an AmeriCorps award helped fund my clerkship at YRJ. My daughter was born in 2008 which added an additional expenditure. **Between law school loan payments and daycare, much of my salary was spent. It became nearly impossible to work the long hours of a public defender while constantly juggling finances.** In early 2011, I received a job offer from a public high school which provided more flexible hours and, surprisingly, a higher salary. I went to law school to work with children and I loved the work I did at YRJ, but I could no longer afford to work there—as a result, I took the job offer.

**My student loan debt when I graduated in 2008 was over 100 thousand dollars. While I was eligible for some loan forgiveness, it was a small portion of my annual loan payments and it wouldn't fully benefit me until I had worked for ten years. Making a living and supporting my family on the low salary I had earned at YRJ was impossible for me.**

My family and I subsidized the state through my work. **I often worked 60 hours per week .** My days were full of court hearings, client meetings and meetings with DHS and treatment providers. I often reviewed discovery, did legal research and prepared motions during lunches, evenings, and weekends.

**If I had been compensated at the same level as the prosecutors I appeared with every day, I would still be doing the work I loved.**

I thank you for considering the challenges facing public defenders, and I hope they inspire you to pass HB 3463.