

Youth, Rights & Justice

ATTORNEYS AT LAW

To: House Committee on Judiciary, 2013 Oregon Legislature

From: Kevin J Ellis, Staff Attorney

Date: April 9, 2013

Re: **Support for HB 3463 – Parity for Public Defenders**

Chair Barker and Members of the Committee:

My name is Kevin Ellis and I am a staff attorney at Youth, Rights & Justice. I have worked at YRJ for 6 1/2 years. I represent children, youth and parents in the juvenile court system. I work full time and currently carry 103 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.**

As public defenders, our work is very difficult. At YRJ, virtually all of our cases involve child abuse or neglect. The families we serve experience domestic violence, substance abuse, intergenerational poverty and other serious risk factors. It is exhausting and heartbreaking work. Our caseloads are too high and our pay is too low.

A law degree is required to do the work that I do. **My student loan debt when I graduated in 2005 was \$90,000.** Making a living on the low salary I have earned at YRJ is a difficult struggle, and **I still have zero savings.** Recently vandals broke a window of my car. This occurred on the tail end of a pay period and I was forced to borrow money from my parents to get it fixed. **I live paycheck to paycheck and, if an unforeseen bill occurs, my finances can be desperate for months after as I will have to use a high interest credit card to handle any unexpected expenses.**

My day is full of court hearings, client meetings, visits to jails, prisons, psychiatric wards, the Oregon State Hospital, immigration detention center, and meetings with DHS and treatment providers. In the evening and on weekends I frequently visit clients in foster homes, review discovery, do legal research and prepare motions – things that are necessary to do my job but I rarely have time to complete during the normal work week.

In spite of these very difficult conditions, I am dedicated to the work I do. **I simply want to be compensated at a level that reflects my education and experience, and I think it's only fair to be compensated at least as well as the prosecutors I appear with every day.** Our roles are equally important to help ensure that the individuals involved in the juvenile court system achieve the most fair and just results possible.

I thank you for considering our circumstances, and I hope they inspire you to pass HB 3463.