



CIRCUIT COURT OF OREGON
TWENTIETH JUDICIAL DISTRICT

**RE: TESTIMONY ON HB 2337 BEFORE THE HOUSE JUDICIARY COMMITTEE
FEBRUARY 25, 2015**

Chair Barker and Representatives, thank you for the opportunity to present information on Washington County Circuit Court's need for an additional judicial position and appropriate staff for that judge. My name is Kirsten Thompson, I have been a Circuit Court Judge in Washington County for 13 years, and have served in the areas of family law, juvenile law, criminal law, and was presiding judge from 2011 – 2014. I am here on behalf of the Washington County Circuit Court, and our Presiding Judge Charlie Bailey, who was unavailable today.

Washington County currently has 14 circuit court judges. We serve the second largest county by population (approximately over 560,000 2013 US Census estimate + 1.44% growth) and one of the fastest growing counties (increase percentage approx 1.44-1.9%). Washington County last received a new judicial position in 2003. We have about one judge for every 40,000 residents – more residents per judge than any other judicial district in the state.

Washington County is confident that we are utilizing our current resources to the fullest. We have developed many programs to address our docket needs. In 2008 our court developed an Early Case Resolution program which allows close to a third of all criminal cases filed in Washington County to resolve at a defendant's first court appearance. In addition to Early Case Resolution, we have DUI & Reckless Driving Diversion, Drug Court (both adult and juvenile), Domestic Violence Deferred Sentencing and Mental Health Court. Each early resolution, specialty, and court diversion program helps reduce recidivism and save resources, while holding defendants accountable for their actions.

In Family Law and Civil dockets, Washington County supplements the elected Circuit Court Judges with our one Referee Pro Tempore Judge as well as volunteer Pro Tempore Judges, Reference Judges, volunteer mediators in Small Claims and Landlord Tenant cases, arbitration of lower level civil cases, mediation in family law parenting matters, and settlement conferences in all case types.

Over the past two years, our court has undergone a complete reengineering of our criminal docket process. Our goal is to more efficiently process criminal cases, so that judges are more available for the increasing demand in domestic relations, probate, and civil matters. Many civil litigants cannot afford to hire or choose not to hire attorneys, which places an increased burden



on the court to hold timely and meaningful hearings – particularly in areas involving the protection and support of children, victims of domestic violence, disabled, and elderly residents.

The most fundamental aspect of any court is to administer justice in a timely fashion. Despite all the steps outlined above, we find ourselves slipping in our ability to timely adjudicate matters, especially civil actions. Currently, Washington County is second highest on the list of pending cases per judge.

About four years ago our civil judges spoke with civil litigants about their concerns regarding Washington County courts. Chief among their concerns was our inability to assign judges for civil trials. In the area of Family Law, experienced attorneys report that litigants choose to hire reference judges, at significant expense, to hear their cases instead of bringing their case to the Circuit Court, as they cannot be guaranteed a timely trial with a sitting judge

Our need is in all areas--criminal, civil, juvenile, probate and domestic relations--the bottom line is we need more judges to ensure Washington County citizens are getting timely and just results. As the immediate past presiding judge for Washington County, I have seen many cases where the litigants were ready, and jurors available, but without a judge and court staff, I could not assign the case for trial. We could use as many as four new judges, but even one additional judge would make a big difference in our busy dockets.

The County recognizes our need and is supportive to the point of remodeling a portion of our existing facility to add a courtroom for a new judge when one is authorized. Again, thank you Chair Barker and all members of the judicial committee for your service, and for giving me the opportunity to tell you about Washington County and our need for an additional judge.