



METROPOLITAN PUBLIC DEFENDER MULTNOMAH COUNTY SECTION

Legislative Testimony

March 13, 2017

Re: SB 692, Testimony in Support

Chair Prozanski, Members of the Senate Judiciary Committee,

Metropolitan Public Defender (MPD) is the largest public defender in the state, handling on average approximately 15,000 criminal, juvenile and mental health cases a year, primarily in Multnomah and Washington Counties. For the last 18 months MPD has been engaged in an effort to shift to a model of representation that is focused on the long-term success of the client. Public defense is part legal work and part social work. Since more than 90% of cases result in pleas and the vast majority of people who are incarcerated will be released within 5 years, it makes sense to raise the quality of our social work to meet the high standards we have for our legal work. Criminal justice involvement is almost always a symptom of deeper social problems, like mental illness, addiction, homelessness or trauma. The public defender organization is ideally situated to start building solutions the moment a person enters the criminal justice system. This bill for one preentry social worker is part of the larger project to leverage public defense in a way that will reduce crime and lower system costs.

When MPD was mapping community resources and building partnerships, the MercyCorps Reentry Transition Center was high on our list of providers to visit. They did indeed have resources for our clients, but what stuck with us was their perspective that there were some simple tasks we could be doing prior to incarceration that would make it easier for them to help keep their clients stable and crime-free. For example, if a person's child support is not put on hold, the debt will build up during the period of incarceration and make it much more difficult to obtain employment, housing and stability. If a person's documents aren't secured in the correct way, it creates a series of time-consuming steps on the back end that must be taken before housing, employment or stability is possible. It turned out there were a dozen things we could be doing that would make it much easier for people who are being incarcerated to ultimately reenter the community. Over the summer of 2016, some students and I were able to research, test and hone the preentry idea and we put together a checklist and a packet of resources. Our conclusion was that the reentry suggestion was exactly right, but that it needed a temporary but full-time position to build a bridge or continuous thread from public defense to the Department of

Corrections to the Departments of Community Justice and to the reentry and community social service providers. Public defense is the biggest gap in the systemic solution. The period of representation is treated by everyone as a waiting period, after which the rehabilitative work can start. But that's exactly the problem. For want of a nail, we are losing the battle. This genuinely is one of those few areas where a single position can realign the criminal justice system so that we are all working together to increase stability, lower recidivism and lower system costs.

We urge your yes vote on SB 692. Thank you for your consideration,

Alex Bassos
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