

To: Joint Committee on Legislative Administration

Re: Pay equity considerations for member staff

Co-Chair Courtney, Co-Chair Kotek and members of the committee:

The work of legislative member staff during these concentric global pandemics is more vital than ever before. Legislative staff are serving as the frontline response for Oregonians in dire financial circumstances; filling gaps at state agencies, like the Oregon Employment Department, while maintaining other responsibilities; responding to rapidly changing conditions to ensure the work of the Legislature can continue remotely; and working behind the scenes to connect the constituents we serve to the Legislative process.

Like many other facets of society, the pandemic has revealed structural weaknesses in the way our communities and social services operate. The same can be said for the untenable and unsustainable structure we have within the Legislature.

As staff, we appreciate the work that has been put into reexamining the Branch's pay structure. There is no doubt that the changes being discussed today are major improvements over the existing process. As you begin to dig into the Segal Waters recommendations, we would like to highlight a few perspectives we believe are integral to consider during deliberations.

1. **Impacts of lower than market pay:** The Segal analysis finds that the Legislature is paying staff below-market wages on average. Anecdotally, member staff see large disparities between their own salaries and those of staff with similar roles in other government entities. This disparity leads to a number of problems. Many offices struggle to recruit and retain quality candidates with extensive experience or specialized knowledge, and the vast majority of staffers stay in their role less than five years. In a position that depends on deep institutional knowledge and strong relationships, turnover represents a serious loss to the work of the Legislature and to the people we serve.

These concerns are heightened for staffers from underrepresented communities. Low pay is a serious barrier to individuals who have significant student loans, are first generation college students, have families to support, and who do not have a cushion to fall back on—meaning that low pay is disproportionately a barrier to BIPOC Oregonians. Without changes to pay, the Legislature will continue to struggle to recruit and retain employees of color and miss out on talented individuals who may simply be unable to afford to work in their Capitol.

2. **Fair and transparent process:** We also encourage you to consider how the pay equity process puts the onus on staff to justify their wages to human resource professionals who might not be familiar with our day-to-day responsibilities. Partially due to the Legislature's unique structure, there historically has been a lack of transparency in how staff are paid and how work is

rewarded. Staff have largely been expected to advocate their own way to an acceptable salary, while some have benefitted from their legislator advocating on their behalf.

Requiring significant personal investment from staff risks replicating the inequalities pay equity was intended to prevent. Employees should not have to know the full history and structure of pay equity in the Legislature in order to determine whether their compensation is fair. Individuals with more capacity, knowledge, and resources are better able to navigate complicated and opaque processes. New and inexperienced staffers deserve to be paid fairly, too.

We respectfully request that Legislative Administration work to ensure that the pay equity process is transparent and easy to navigate—both as the new pay structure and methodology is developed and going forward as that methodology is applied to our work. This could include meaningful opportunities for staff input, clear procedures to appeal or question decisions about one's pay, and proactive outreach from the Branch to address inequities. Staff must have the tools to ensure that their pay and job description reflect the work they do, as well as protection in the event that the member they work for does not agree with their interpretation.

3. **Universal application of changes:** By the time a new pay equity structure is finalized, some employees will have been underpaid for nearly two years. Impacted employees include staff who worked during legislative sessions only and year-round staff who have since departed for other opportunities. If the structure for calculating pay equity is retroactive, then all individuals who were employed during the time that is being re-evaluated should also be eligible for back pay. Being a current employee at the time of review should not be a requirement in order to receive full, fair wages.

Thank you for your consideration. We look forward to future conversations and continued collaboration as we work towards our common goal of providing the highest quality service to the people of Oregon.

Sincerely,

Lex Jakusovszky
Zoe Klingmann
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