

OREGON TRIAL LAWYERS ASSOCIATION

812 SW Washington St, Suite 900

Portland, OR 97205

www.oregontriallawyers.org

503-799-1017

Testimony of Arthur Towers
In Support of SB 5516
Before the
Ways and Means Joint Subcommittee on
Transportation & Economic Development
April 1, 2019

Thank you for the opportunity to testify today on this important topic. As you know OTLA members are lawyers who fight for workers' rights and for the civil rights of all Oregonians.

We partner with and support BOLI's work in these areas. The Oregonians BOLI is helping are among our most vulnerable workers. Workers who have to seek BOLI assistance on payment of wages are those employers feel comfortable stealing from. The failure to enforce wage and hour laws is patently unfair to vast majority of employers who play by the rules. Why in the world would we want them to have to compete against employers who take the low road?

Workers who struggle with on-the-job discrimination, harassment, retaliation related to a workers' comp claim, and the need for whistle-blower protection are the ones who seek BOLI's help. The discrimination can be based on sex, gender, race, or disability. Increasing funding for enforcement speaks to who we are as Oregonians.

The legislature has worked hard to protect workers' rights in Oregon, and have taken tough votes to do so. But if these laws are difficult to enforce, then the will of the legislature is being thwarted.

The budget requests for BOLI are reasonable especially in light of the 30 year decline in staffing for the agency. The agency has lost 35% of its staff since 1990, while Oregon has 1,300,000 more residents.

The agency's plan for increased staffing is strategic. Getting a modernized website set up should reduce the number of incoming phone calls. Hiring an intake coordinator, a public records specialist, and an accountant will free up civil rights investigators to focus their specialized skills on investigations.

BOLI reported that they are able to meet their response timelines 85% of the time on civil rights' cases. That still leaves 300 Oregonians whose rights may have been violated in limbo for far too long.

This subcommittee has the power to enhance the civil rights of Oregonians without changing public policy. We strongly encourage your support for BOLI's modest request for increased staffing.