

# Youth, Rights & Justice

ATTORNEYS AT LAW

February 3, 2020

Chair Sanchez  
Vice-Chair Bynum  
Vice-Chair Sprenger

Re: Support for HB4004-Public Defense System Reform

Members of the House Committee on Judiciary,  
As Oregon's defense firm dedicated exclusively to juvenile law, YRJ is court-appointed to represent children in foster care, parents whose children have been removed, and youth in the juvenile justice system. We are a team of 34 attorneys, legal assistants, and other specialists. We represent over 800 clients each year. Roughly 80% of our clients are in the child welfare (foster care) system, with the balance in the juvenile justice system. All of our clients come from low income families. Most have suffered significant trauma and many have physical, mental health and/or substance abuse issues. Approximately 45% are children of color.

Over our four-decade history, we have also worked with the systems supporting vulnerable children, youth and families, changing them for the better. Because of our unique position handling court-appointed juvenile cases, we often see the same systemic problems and we work to change the policies that contribute to these problems. Through this, our work has touched hundreds of thousands of Oregonians.

Youth, Rights & Justice supports the broad public defense reform concepts articulated in House Bill 4004. As this Committee is sorely aware, inadequate funding for public defense services in Oregon has been a chronic problem. Not unlike our fellow public defense contractors in the State, YRJ has sustained an unprecedented 25% turnover in staff annually for the last four years. Hiring qualified attorneys and staff at YRJ is directly handicapped by inadequate State funding. As a non-profit contracting entity, YRJ has been unable to even keep pace with the inadequate compensation of some of our peer public defense contractors. Insufficient funding also compromises our ability to provide the training needed to handle the types of complex cases heard by the juvenile court. Constant turnover and insufficient resources adversely impacts our clients and compromises our ability to provide high quality legal representation.

HB 4004 contains a number of provisions that will address many of the shortcomings of the Oregon public defense system as articulated in the report from the Sixth Amendment Center (6AC) on the *Right to Counsel in Oregon*.<sup>1</sup> Its promise to adopt reasonable and appropriate caseloads, to provide resources *comparable to those of the prosecution* that include staff and

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<sup>1</sup> Right to Counsel in Oregon, Sixth Amendment Center, January 2019.  
[http://sixthamendment.org/6AC/6AC\\_Oregon\\_report\\_2019\\_withappendix.pdf](http://sixthamendment.org/6AC/6AC_Oregon_report_2019_withappendix.pdf)

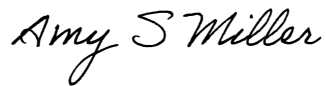
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overhead, and to ensure the contracting process is transparent, equitable, and culturally competent is fundamental to improving the public defense system.<sup>2</sup>

Thank you so much for your work to improve our public defense system so that we can better protect the rights of vulnerable children, youth, and parents. We look forward to continued dialogue regarding how the reforms articulated in HB 4004 will be implemented in practice.

Sincerely,



Amy S. Miller  
Executive Director

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<sup>2</sup> Because YRJ attorneys practice juvenile law, it is often the Department of Justice, not the District Attorney that serves in the role of prosecutor. Therefore, for juvenile dependency cases, we encourage the committee to consider resources (including salaries, benefits, and staff support) comparable to the Department of Justice.