



AFSCME Support for  
Public Defense - Trial Level Services  
In HB 5030

May 10, 2021

Dear Chair Gorsek and Sollman and Members of the Ways and Means Committee on Public Safety,

Thank you for the opportunity to speak in favor fully funding Public Defense services in HB 5030.

My name is Charile Peirson. I am a member of AFSCME Local 2805 and I'm a public defender in Portland. I'm here to share with you a little bit about my clients and offer some feedback from them about how Oregon's public defense system is working.

First, from last week's hearing you should know that my clients are all struggling. No one in Oregon gets a court appointed attorney without proving that they are "financially unable to retain adequate representation without substantial hardship in providing basic economic necessities to the [themselves] or [their] dependent family." In Multnomah County, court-appointed attorneys represent around 85% of people who get charged with a crime. That means, bluntly, that a large majority of people charged with crimes are so poor that hiring a minimally competent lawyer would cost them rent money or take food out of their childrens' mouths.

It's not a coincidence that many of my clients also struggle with housing. And when they struggle with behavioral health, physical health, or substance use issues, those struggles are much more likely to happen in public. They are more likely to be Black or Brown than the population at large.

A court-appointed attorney is often the only professional person in their lives who is absolutely and unequivocally *on their side*. No matter their struggles, no matter their mess, no matter their ability.

But our clients want you to know that they need more time from their lawyers. They need their lawyers to spend more time on a lawyer's tasks - research, writing, advising, arguing - and less time on investigation, on maintaining lists of shelters, on cold-calling interpreters.

In the early 1960's, Oregon joined in the effort to establish a national right to a defense attorney, even for people who can't afford one. In the early 1980's, this body first established a statewide public defense funding mechanism. In the early 2000's, you established the PDSC to modernize funding and oversight. It's been another 20 years, and we are due for another update. This one must bear in mind that the 6th Amendment Center's Study that shows this 20 year cycle has left poor Oregonians charged with crimes out in the cold.



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PCRCP has already shown that court-appointed attorneys are an excellent point of contact for services for our clients. Funding social workers to work in parallel with public defenders channels public services to the people who need them - and who have an obligation to stay *on their side*. Nearly every one of my clients would benefit from these services, whether it's substance use treatment to help them show a prosecutor that they mean business or mental health treatment to make sure that they can handle the stress of a trial.

I believe that everyone here wants just outcomes from every criminal case. If you want that, I urge you to pass HB 5030, and I encourage you to think of it as a necessary first step on the path to a truly modern public defense system for Oregonians.

In Unity,

Charlie Peirson  
AFSCME Local 2805