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Testimony in support of HB 2417

Thank you for the opportunity to present written testimony in place of oral testimony. Although I had signed up to testify, allotted time did not permit my participation and my name was not called. I provide this testimony because I support more funding directed to local government and nonprofit partnerships to direct sorely needed funds to invest in mental wellness for our citizens. I work with an informal group of attorneys on a volunteer basis in the Rogue Valley, Lawyers for Justice, who seek to promote change to policing, government rules and procedures, and governance by promoting socially, racially and economically fair systems, laws and procedures. This proposed bill speaks to the work we are doing.

As a nation we chose in the 1980s to begin directing tax dollars to the construction of prisons and away from the support of mental wellness. 40 years later, this choice we made as a country has devastated economically, socially, and racially marginalized people profoundly, and mental illness rates among those so marginalized have correspondingly skyrocketed. By criminalizing behavior associated with mental illness and lack of resources for housing, we created a generation of individuals who have never known a safety net and are fearful of police intervention, because the police are not there to protect and serve, but rather to arrest and remove. The choice we consciously made can now be reversed at the State level through funding and grants directed back to local communities by recognizing we all benefit from mental wellness promoted by trained individuals coming from a place of respect, understanding, and compassion when intervention is required to promote safety.

We need programs “upstream” from the eventuality of incarceration and jailing of unwell individuals, to provide support needed to navigate episodes of mental breakdown and resultant harm caused by improper responses to the mental health crises in our society. “Upstream” before incarceration and police intervention means funding programs that keep folks well and monitors disturbances through social work and mental health professional assistance. If we only address a problem through the use of police intervention, we are left with fines, punishment, and incarceration as a poor solution to a problem that is exacerbated by bringing to bear the full weight of the law on already fearful and powerless individuals.

As an attorney who practices in the civil arena, I file guardianships for family members of mentally compromised individuals often, and I encounter many clients who have loved ones who cannot be helped by the police, or even their family, in an appropriately staged approach-its either locking folks up

in a behavioral health unit or releasing them without support to the streets where they are preyed upon by others due to their vulnerability. Many family members do not want to call the police on their loved ones experiencing a manic episode or psychotic break, because they know this intervention will cause more harm than good. This leaves the vulnerable individual with no help at all.

I am also the sister of a profoundly autistic man and I have experienced first-hand the life threatening intervention police can pose to a disabled adult who cannot converse or express himself, and is unable to comply with police commands. My brother came very close to being shot because he entered the home of a neighbor desiring to hear the radio the neighbor was playing. I will never forget this experience as long as I live, and it is one of the reasons I chose to become an attorney to help individuals who do not have an ability to advocate for themselves. If a CAHOOTS type program had existed then, the police would not have come in with guns blazing. Instead, a mental health professional would have been able to redirect and calm my brother while creating safety for the neighbor.

CAHOOTS will save the tax payers money, because at the civil, criminal, and treatment level, early recognition and intervention is essential. More individuals will call for help with a problematic interaction or an unwell person earlier in the process if they know someone OTHER than the police will be responding who has the training and skill set to help, rather than hurt, the compromised individual desperately needing support and assistance. We owe this safety net to our community, it is the right thing to do, and with hindsight as 20-20, we know criminalizing the mental health epidemic has dire consequences for all of us.

Thank you for allowing me to speak to this important proposed legislation.