

PUBLIC DEFENDER SERVICES OF LANE COUNTY, INC.

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Chair Bynum, Vice Chairs Noble and Power, Members of the Committee,

I want to thank you for your support of public defense. As you know from the ABA workload study released last month, Public Defenders in Oregon are struggling under crippling caseloads. My office, Public Defender Services of Lane County, helps thousands of clients a year who cannot afford lawyers when they're charged with a crime or involved with DHS. Oregon is struggling to find lawyers for unrepresented clients, which highlights the need to invest in Public Defenders who are dedicated to careers in indigent defense. We need smaller caseloads and more resources to hire and retain the excellent lawyers in my office, and one often overlooked issue is the student loan debt most of my lawyers have had to put on the back burner to put their client's interests first.

I asked my lawyers this week to share their level of student loan debt – the average debt load was \$168,000. It's difficult to pay back student loans when you work in public defense, as we are paid far less than prosecutors, judges, and other government attorneys. Most my lawyers with student loan debt are hoping they will achieve long term debt relief through the federal government's Public Service Loan Forgiveness program. As I'm sure you've heard, that program can be very challenging to navigate, and it often takes multiple attempts to even qualify. I've been a Public Defender for 12 years, and it took me countless attempts to make sure my loan payments were eligible, that I was in the right program, before I finally qualified for forgiveness of my student loan debt. The promise of repayment was one of the reasons stayed in public defense and did not pursue private criminal defense opportunities instead.

By dedicating specific funds so that public defense lawyers can receive direct support while they're paying their loans, we can help keep talented Public Defenders in Oregon and expand our ability to attract lawyers and law students from other states to expand the ranks of public defenders that the ABA workload study calls for. This bill will not reform public defense in Oregon, and it is not a substitute for pay parity with government lawyers, but it's an excellent step in the right direction. Thank you Representative Bynum for proposing this legislation.

Sincerely,

Brook Reinhard

Brook Reinhard
Executive Director
Public Defender Services of Lane County