

PUBLIC DEFENDER SERVICES OF LANE COUNTY, INC.

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

My name is Caitlin Plummer. I am a staff attorney at Public Defender Services of Lane County. I am testifying in support of HB 4007. Thank you to Chair Bynum and the members of this committee for introducing this important bill and supporting the work of public defense.

I have been a lawyer for 10 years and have spent almost all that time representing indigent defendants at the trial, appellate and post-conviction levels. Fortunately for me, that means I am close to having my student loans forgiven by the Federal Public Service Loan Forgiveness Program. But it has not been an easy road to get to this point.

When I started law school in 2008, I funded the vast majority of my education with student loans. As I neared graduation and came to terms with the massive amount of debt I had accumulated, I felt limited in my career choices. I wanted to enter public defense but couldn't fathom how I would make loan payments and support myself on a public defender salary. For that reason, when I graduated, I took a job I didn't really want at a large law firm. I took it because it paid me well enough to make my nearly \$200,000 of debt seem somewhat manageable. But working in corporate law was never my passion.

I quit that job after just six months and took my first job as an attorney representing indigent criminal defendants. My new salary was only a quarter of the salary I made at the law firm. I lived paycheck-to-paycheck for years. I carried a debt on my credit card. I did it because I was committed to the work, and because I knew that my challenges were nothing compared to those of the people who I represented—or even other public defenders who were in a worse position than I was.

Particularly as a younger attorney, I was only able to keep up with my payments because I was fortunate to have help from a loan repayment program through my law school. But not everyone has that option. Meaning many new graduates are virtually excluded from entering this profession by virtue of their student debts. Many of those that start off in public defense leave when they realize they can't keep up with their bills, or because they want to start a family and the math of that simply doesn't work out. Or because the stress—including the financial stress—simply becomes too much.

We need bigger and longer-term solutions for public defense. We need more public defenders, we need to decrease caseloads, and we need to increase compensation so that public defenders

are paid a salary equivalent to prosecutors. This bill cannot solve all the problems we're facing—but it is an important start and will help those at especially high risk of either never entering the profession at all or leaving after just a few years. Entering this profession was the best career decision I ever made. But it wasn't an easy one and it came with huge financial consequences. Anything we can do to make this decision easier for other attorneys, is an important step in the right direction.

This bill will help recruit and retain passionate and high-quality public defenders. In turn, it will help the underprivileged and deeply vulnerable populations that we serve. They deserve high-quality representation regardless of their poverty. This bill is a critical part of making sure that happens.

Please vote yes on HB 4007.

Sincerely,

Caitlin Plummer
Staff Attorney
Public Defender Services of Lane County