



STATEMENT IN SUPPORT OF SB 817

To: Chair Prozanski, Senate Committee on Judiciary
From: United Food and Commercial Workers Local 555
3/14/23

Chair Prozanski, Vice-Chair Thatcher, and Members of the Senate Committee on Judiciary,

Thank you for the opportunity to testify today on SB 817, which would address the current public defense crisis in Oregon. UFCW Local 555 is the largest private sector labor union in Oregon. Our members come from a number of industries, including grocery, retail, food processing, manufacturing, and healthcare. We are a diverse group of workers who take pride in acting as a strong collective voice for working people. We are proud to stand in solidarity with Oregon AFSCME and the Fair Shot Coalition in support of SB 817, which expands the eligibility of pre-plea probation.

Senate Bill 817 expands human-centered criminal legal processes that balance system efficiency with individual accountability by making more people charged with low-level crimes eligible for “Pre-plea Probation” or “Pre-plea Diversion”. By expanding this eligibility, the bill will allow more Oregonians accused of low level crimes a pathway to take responsibility and work toward charge dismissals through counseling and or community service, reducing the need for public defense attorneys while also improving outcomes for the community.

Hundreds of Oregonians are currently stuck in limbo because Oregon has failed to uphold its constitutional responsibility to provide adequate legal counsel to those who can't afford a private attorney. With our public defense system so chronically under-resourced, people accused of a crime are either waiting indefinitely for a public defender to become available, or are negotiating plea deals without adequate legal support. This leads to system imbalances and vulnerabilities that contribute to unjust case outcomes, disproportionately impacting Black and brown communities.

Currently, judges lack the authority to manage criminal legal system overloads by diverting low-level cases into supervision. This bill would give judges that authority without restriction by the district attorney.

- Defendants would waive their right to a trial, meaning that if they don't follow through with the terms of diversion, they go into a sentencing hearing.
- This also gives first time offenders of misdemeanors and non-person Class C felonies the opportunity to get connected with services and supports, instead of being denied access to housing and self-sufficiency programs due to a felony conviction.

What happens in our criminal legal system impacts all of us, but it disproportionately harms Black and brown Oregonians as they are more likely to both be arrested and be victimized by crime. People's lives can forever

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be changed by an unjust ruling — leading to excessive prison and jail sentences, separation from family, fines and debt, restricted job and housing opportunities, and isolation and trauma. This cycle is costly to individuals, families, communities and puts unnecessary strain on our support systems.

Part of Oregon's high caseload could be prevented by connecting people with services and programs that address the root causes of their criminal justice system involvement. Along with other solutions to support the public defense workforce, SB 817 will help decrease the caseloads of public defenders and courts and provide better access to justice for all Oregonians.

We strongly urge your support.

Madison Walters,
Political Liaison,
UFCW Local 555

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