



Date: March 29th, 2023
To: House Committee on Judiciary
From: Jennifer Parrish Taylor, Director of Advocacy and Public Policy for the Urban League of Portland
Re: Support for Public Defense Services Student Loan Repayment Assistance Program in Oregon State Bar, HB 2467

Chair Kropf, Vice-Chairs Andersen and Wallan, and Members of the Committee,

Thank you for the opportunity to provide testimony in support of House Bill 2467. My name is Jennifer Parrish Taylor, and I am submitting this testimony on behalf of the Urban League of Portland. The Urban League of Portland is one of Oregon's oldest civil rights and social service organizations, empowering African Americans and others to achieve equality in education, employment, health, economic security, and quality of life across Oregon and SW Washington.

The American Bar Association released a report showing that our state has only 1/3 of the attorneys it needs in order to adequately defend all of the Oregonians who need a public defender. That prompted President Harmon Johnson to propose the idea of student loan forgiveness for Oregon attorneys who take on court-appointed cases and represent indigent Oregonians. Certainly, the State needs to fund increased wages and better benefits in order to recruit and retain the additional 1,300 attorneys that are needed to defend Oregonians. This body should immediately look to fund these attorneys at levels that will provide compensation at least equal to the prosecutors who are public employees.

Our state is failing to meet the requirements of the Sixth Amendment of the U.S. Constitution whereby Oregonians charged with criminal offenses should receive adequate legal representation. House Bill 2467 is focused on the policies needed to support the current workforce and build up the workforce providing Oregon's public defense services. It is one step in the work here at the legislature, but it will be the investments in Ways and Means that will determine the success of the policies in this bill. The student loan repayment assistance program which would be housed in the Oregon Bar, would provide grants for public defense staff and attorneys to help cover student loan repayments while they are working toward their 10 years of service to qualify for federal loan forgiveness. I cannot understate the impacts this would have for current lawyers and recent law school graduates who are saddled with debt. We know that 71% of law school students graduate in debt, with students borrowing an average of \$118,100¹; fewer than one in four new law school graduates say that their legal education was worth the financial cost.

¹ <https://educationdata.org/average-law-school-debt#:~:text=71%25%20of%20law%20school%20students,was%20worth%20the%20financial%20cost.>



For Black law school graduates, their loan debts are 97% higher on average than their white law school peers.² House Bill 2467 would be vital to Black law school graduates, who have on average heavier student loan debt burdens as compared to their peers. As we increase the number of court-appointed defense attorneys, we must be mindful that they come from the diverse communities of the Oregonians that they serve.

Facing these odds, it is no wonder that current public defenders are leaving the profession for more sustainable workloads and livable wages. This program would provide the much-needed debt relief assistance that so many providers and support staff are seeking; it would become a powerful retention tool needed to recruit and retain the additional 1,300 attorneys that are needed to defend indigent Oregonians. Current compensation structures foreclose their options to earn a living and pay their debt. It is a deep sacrifice that most cannot afford to make. This bill is a down payment and is in alignment with other important funding the legislature is committing, to make Oregon's system of justice meet constitutional muster.

We urge you to support House Bill 2467.

Respectfully,

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