

Dear Chair Prozanski, Co-Chair Thatcher, and Members of the Senate Judiciary Committee,

Thank you for the opportunity to provide testimony on SB 337 and on larger efforts to reform Oregon's Public Defense System.

My name is KC Lewis, I am an attorney who has worked in the criminal justice system, in public policy, and in mental health rights policy for the past eight years. Less than a month ago, I became a public defender. I did so because I believed it was my civic duty as an attorney to serve my community at a time when defendants are going unrepresented across Oregon. But I also did so because in my previous role as Managing Attorney for the Mental Health Rights Project with Disability Rights Oregon, I saw first-hand how crucial the work of public defenders was to ensuring better outcomes for people with mental illness and other disabilities who were swept up in in our criminal justice system.

When a person with a mental illness is charged with a crime, their public defender is often the first person they meet who is truly and unequivocally on their side. Public defenders and their invaluable support staff help connect defendants with resources, argue for them to be able to be treated in less restrictive environments, and ultimately are the last line of defense between them and a system that often chews them up and spits them out at great expense to the taxpayer. Every dollar invested in public defense pays dividends in terms of the savings the state receives in costs at jails, prisons, and the State Hospital, and higher levels of service that people often require when they have been broken and traumatized by criminal justice involvement.

SB 337 is a necessary first step in the process of building a functioning public defense system. It makes the structural changes that will be necessary to support future investments and reforms in public defense, while providing the pathway to having a more resilient and robust system. These changes have been vetted by stakeholders over a yearslong process, and are built on the knowledge and experience of experts both inside and outside of the criminal justice system. I urge you to pass SB 337, to provide the funding necessary to attract, train, and retain qualified public defense attorney, and to continue to work towards a system that will ensure every Oregonian has their Constitutionally-guaranteed right to zealous advocacy protected. Thank you all.

KC Lewis