

April 20, 2023

Dear Co-Chair Sollman, Co-Chair Evans and Members of the Committee,

My name is Jonathan Sarre. I am the administrator of the Portland Defense Consortium (PDC) and also a full time public defense provider. The Portland Defense Consortium contracts with the Office of Public Defense Services to provide defense lawyers to individuals charged with the most serious felony crimes including Murder, sexual crimes and other Ballot Measure 11 offenses in Multnomah County. Our consortium consists of fifteen attorneys. The bulk of our membership put most, if not all of their time representing folks who cannot afford legal representation.

I am writing on behalf of myself and the membership of the group I work with to ask the legislature to properly fund public defense. While the fact that Oregon public defense is in crisis has been in the news recently, we who do the work know that this problem is not a recent one nor will tinkering around the edges solve it. Oregonians need to put forth the investment deserving of the crucial constitutionally protected right to effective and qualified Counsel. For too long has groups like mine been forced to do more with less so they can do their jobs of defending citizens who are charged with some of the most serious crimes in the criminal justice system. Our lawyers, our staff, our paralegals and investigators are paid at rates very much below what they could be making working for a prosecutor's office or in civil practice.

While my group is fortunate to be stable thanks to a presence of veteran attorneys, their caseloads are too high for the type of criminal defense work they do and their pay is too low. The same is said for the dedicated men and women to assist our lawyers either as legal assistants, paralegals or investigators (who are typically free-lancers who are paid by the hour at a rate almost half of what similar work in federal court pays).

Prior to working for PDC, I was the felony supervisor at Multnomah Defenders Inc, a not-for-profit public defender's office. During my time at the PD's office, I watched talented attorneys and support staff come and go. I watched people's zeal for this job, helping some of the most vulnerable in our community, first flag and then disappear completely, crushed by high workloads, long hours and not enough to show for it in their pay checks.

When new lawyers can't stay in the system, the whole judicial system suffers. Institutional memory is lost. Good attorneys leave this corner of the profession. While entry level lawyers tend to be on the staff at most PDs offices, attorneys at groups like mine can only gain the qualifications to represent people on murder charges with years of experience that usually starts with misdemeanors and progresses into felony defense as these dedicated people continue to work within the system. If newly minted lawyers don't enter the system or leave after a brief stint, then the only thing I can promise is that our current crisis will get considerably worse.

Thanks for reading this and please fund public defense for all Oregonians.

Jonathan T. Sarre

