



## **SB 337 - Public Defense Reform**

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**Local 3668 - Metropolitan Public Defenders**

I am a public defender in Washington County who works on our firm's major felony team. The reasons why we can't find and keep attorneys and staff who want to work in public defense are very clear to me, but I want to talk about why this is such an especially difficult part of the legal field.

Not any attorney can do this work, and asking attorneys who have never worked in public defense to come in and "help out" with our cases is, frankly, disturbing. This is not like any other job in the legal system. The clientele we work with have extremely complicated needs. The jurisdictions we work in are hostile towards us. Judges and District Attorneys do not trust us. It is a battle everyday to protect our clients' rights and to give them the best defense possible. It would be unethical to let just any attorney do this work without training or support.

**"I have one case open from 2019; I'm the sixth attorney to have worked it."**

There are two big reasons that we can't recruit and retain attorneys in public defense. First, our workloads are completely unsustainable. When I was working on the misdemeanor and minor team, I had a caseload of 135 at one point. I was visiting them on nights and weekends because I had to make sure I was maintaining client contact. On the major felonies team, I'm currently working upwards of 50 cases. Some of my cases are several years old, because so many attorneys have left Metropolitan Public Defenders and I have inherited them. I have one case open from 2019; I'm the sixth attorney to have worked it. I can't take on any more Measure 11 cases until I close some of my cases, which means that more Oregonians are incarcerated without legal representation right now.

Secondly, the financial impacts of doing this work also make it incredibly challenging to stay in this profession. We don't make a commensurate salary with the level of work that we're expected to do, and the majority of us have a lot of student loan debt. I live paycheck to paycheck. I'm unable to save money for future needs because I don't make enough. I have grants to help pay my student loans, but I'm still barely breaking even. I'm lucky that I have a significant other that can help support me financially, but I know that not everyone has that support.

We need competitive salaries and manageable workloads. Public defense is a constitutional obligation of our country, and we are not able to comply with that obligation without enough staff. Those of us who still do this work are here because we care deeply about it, but we can only take so much burnout and financial struggle before we have to move on to take care of ourselves.

**SB 337 provides us with the reforms that we desperately need to recruit and retain attorneys who care about this work. Please vote yes on SB 337!**



# SB 337 - Tri-Branch Public Defense Reforms

SB 337 will:

- Increase pay for public defenders and allow providers to collaborate on policies to address caseloads and workloads.
- Establish a training program for prospective public defense attorneys.
- Move the Office of Public Defense from the Judicial Branch to Executive to create more accountability for public defense outcomes.
- Create a state employee trial division, which will significantly reduce caseload sizes.
- Establishes hourly direct pay for nonprofit individual providers who also have private pay work.
- Aligns with national best practices to ensure that all accused of a crime in Oregon have access to an attorney without financial conflict.

**SB 337:**

- Passed from Senate Judiciary Committee to the Senate Floor with a "Do Pass" recommendation and a request to send it to Ways and Means.