

My name is Paul Solomon and I am submitting this testimony in support of HB 5031, the budget bill for the Oregon Public Defense Commission (OPDC). I bring a unique perspective as a former commissioner, a person who has been represented by a public defender and the current Chair of the Criminal Justice Commission (CJC). I appreciate the opportunity to speak to the urgent need for increased investment in Oregon's public defense system. My comments are my own and not a reflection of any of the public bodies I serve on.

Our state is facing a public defense crisis, and HB 5031 is a crucial step toward ensuring all Oregonians receive the legal representation they are constitutionally guaranteed. Full-time, non-profit public defense providers are an essential component of our system, and they play a critical role in addressing this crisis effectively and efficiently.

These non-profit offices are the backbone of public defense in Oregon. They not only provide representation to thousands of clients annually but are also the primary recruiters, trainers, and supervisors of new public defenders. Without additional investment in these offices, we risk losing the future of our public defense workforce. Expanding full-time public defender positions within these established offices is one of the most cost-effective ways to meet Oregon's growing need. Unlike the hourly program or state trial division, these non-profit offices handle more cases per attorney at a lower cost to the state. By increasing funding for the non-profits we get the best return on investment.

Spending additional funds on the hourly program at this time will only deepen the disparities between underfunded non-profit providers and their better-compensated counterparts. To address this crisis effectively, we must invest in strengthening all facets of our public defense system, ensuring that all providers have the resources necessary to succeed.

Furthermore, these offices employ essential full-time staff beyond attorneys—legal assistants, investigators, office assistants, and case managers—who collectively ensure their clients receive ethical and effective representation. These roles are vital in ensuring public defenders can focus on their caseloads while clients receive the resources and support they need. In addition to delivering efficient legal representation, these public defense offices also play a key role in promoting community safety. Case managers, in particular, connect clients with community-based services, improving outcomes for clients and reducing the risk of future criminal behavior. Investing in additional case managers is essential if we are serious about improving public safety and reducing recidivism.

I urge this committee to support HB 5031 and prioritize the expansion of Oregon's full-time public defense providers. By strengthening these established offices, we can better serve our communities, improve outcomes for clients, and address the current public defense crisis in a cost-effective and sustainable manner.

Thank you for your time and consideration.

Sincerely,

Paul Solomon