

TO: Joint Ways & Means Committee

SUBJECT: Support nonprofit public defenders

Co-Chairs Lieber, Sanchez, Vice-Chairs Girod, Gomberg, Smith, and Members of the Committee:

My name is Andrea Bazan and I have been a Legal Assistant at Southern Oregon Public Defenders, Inc (SOPD, Inc.) since 2021.

Before transferring to the Josephine County office in 2023, I worked in the Jackson County office where I assisted three public defenders who were not yet qualified to work on felony cases. They were assigned misdemeanors and, in 2022 alone, there were 2,844 misdemeanors filed in Jackson County, Oregon according to the Oregon Judicial Department. Between the three attorneys I assisted, we received on average 9-15 new files daily. These numbers become truly staggering when you consider how many new cases this would be per week, per month or per year.

These numbers have only increased over the years, and they do not account for the number of defendants currently on a waiting list to receive representation. I can attest that the goal of every attorney at SOPD is to provide the best possible defense to each client to ensure that they receive a fair trial or resolution of their case. Given the overwhelming number of cases and people facing charges in Josephine and Jackson County, the attorneys with whom I work are left with a nearly impossible task.

In my 4 years of service at SOPD, nine public defenders have left to pursue other employment offering better pay and benefits. This includes the three attorneys I was originally assigned to in Jackson County.

Nearly half of Oregonians are living paycheck to paycheck. (Roughly 45% according to the United Way of Central Oregon). The steep and recent rise in the cost-of-living has and will force attorneys to consider employment other than with a public defender's office. This cannot happen.

As of April of 2025, nearly 4,000 defendants in Oregon have been approved to receive a court appointed attorney and do not have one assigned to them. These defendants were approved due to financial hardships. It should be acknowledged that nearly half of Oregon's population is struggling financially and would also depend on court appointed attorneys for representation.

It's easy to assume that these criminal cases do not really affect our lives. Consider that approximately 25,000 DUII cases were filed in Oregon in 2024; many of these perpetuated by the prolific alcohol advertising and resultant social acceptance. In other words, an activity that is totally legal and promoted. But consuming alcohol can and clearly does lead to *illegal* activities. In 2018, I needed a public defender after I received my life-

changing DUII. I was not financially able to retain a private attorney, and it was a privilege as much as it was my right to be represented by a Public Defender. Funnily enough, I was appointed an attorney through Southern Oregon Public Defenders, Inc. When the opportunity arose for employment at SOPD, Inc. I felt it was a wonderful way to give back to those who helped me through my criminal ordeal.

The attorneys driven to non-profit work are intelligent, hard-working and dedicated to their communities which is why they incurred severe financial hardship to get through law school to pursue public service positions. Increasing salaries and benefits for these individuals is necessary to ensure their existence and, more importantly, to guarantee that citizens' constitutional right to counsel is preserved.

I would like to think that, if rent and student loan debt weren't such financial burdens, many more young minds would welcome the opportunity to defend our constitutional right to counsel.

Thank you for your time and consideration.

Andrea Bazan, Grants Pass, Josephine County, Oregon.