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April 2, 2019

Public Safety Subcommittee co-chairs, Senator Winters and Representative Piluso

Re: Funding for Judicial System

My name is Rima Ghandour and I am President of the Multnomah Bar Association. I am also a member of the Oregon State Bar and the Queen's Bench. I am asking that the legislature restore adequate funding for the court system here in Oregon. Our judicial system is in trouble. As a co-equal branch of government, the judicial branch is the cornerstone of our democracy, and represents only 3% of Oregon's budget. Despite this, the Oregon Judicial Department has seen a 12.5% reduction in staff since 2009, while the population of Oregon has grown by almost the same amount during the same period.

When the courts are underfunded, it isn't the lawyers and law firms who suffer, it's the general public, including the growing number of citizens who depend on court services and who can't afford a lawyer. Veterans, those suffering from mental illness or drug addiction, and victims of abuse and domestic violence are examples of those for whom the courts become not only a resource for justice, but a source of social services and related support. The need for that support is growing exponentially as our population grows, and resources for low-income Oregonians and those in need are stretched beyond their limit.

An example from my practice last year illustrates the need for a well-funded judicial. We were only able to achieve a settlement for our client who was severely injured when we started trial. The settlement allowed the client to pay for his medical bills, reimburse the State for medical bills it had paid, and allow him to keep his housing. Without a trial date and the ability of the court to actually conduct the trial, my client would not have been able to settle the case.

Over 500,000 cases are filed every year in Oregon's courts, yet currently, only three circuit courts in Oregon are able to provide services every day from 8:00am to 5:00pm. After the great recession, the country and state experienced a long period of recovery and economic expansion, but Court funding never recovered. The feeling among many in the Bar is that the justice system is taken for granted. We must take steps to restore the funding we have already lost, and certainly cannot continue to absorb additional cuts. There is simply no more room for additional reductions to funding for the judicial branch.

Best Regard

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read "Rima I. Ghandour", is written over a thin horizontal line.

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