



February 3, 2020

To: The House Judiciary Committee

From: Michele Ruffin, Oregon Political Director, Forward Together Action

Re: Support of HB 4004

Dear Chair Sanchez and Members of the Committee,

Forward Together Action is an affiliated organization of Forward Together, which is in its 30th year of organizing, movement building and power building for communities of color. Forward Together Action pushes for the changes needed to create systems that serve all of us. We know that when women of color, gender nonconforming people and Indigenous communities lead---and lawmakers listen--- we all win. I am writing to you today in support of HB 4004, the Public Defense Reform bill.

Oregon's current justice system perpetuates racial and economic inequality every day. Public defenders are overloaded with cases, so low-income people, and especially those from communities of color, are entering the courtroom without adequate representation. This inadequate representation disproportionately impacts folks of color, Black people and Native communities. According to a recent report by W. Haywood Burns Institute for Justice, Fairness and Equity, for every 1000 Black people whose cases are prosecuted in Multnomah County, 750 are assigned court-appointed attorneys. And for every 1000 Native American people whose cases are prosecuted, 842 are assigned court-appointed attorneys.¹ Without an effective defense, Oregonians are more likely to be unfairly charged and convicted.

We believe that the Public Defense Reform Bill will address some key structural issues that are key drivers of racial inequity in our criminal justice system, by abolishing the flat

¹ <https://www.documentcloud.org/documents/6559824-Multnomah-R-E-D-Analysis-2019-Final-November-19.html>



case rate contracting and developing caseload standards. This legislation is a critical first step in the larger conversation around what Oregon's public defense system should look like in the future. We know that Oregonians of color, Black communities, Native communities and LGBTQ folks experience run-ins with law enforcement at a disproportional rate, so an adequate defense in the court room is not only a constitutional right, but can be the key difference in a family's future.

Please support HB 4004. Thank you for your time and attention.

Sincerely,

Michele Ruffin

Oregon Political Director

Forward Together Action