



To: **Members of the Ways and Means Public Safety Subcommittee**

From: Judge Ben Souede, President
Oregon Circuit Court Judges Association

Date: March 9th, 2023

Re: **Support for SB 5512 – POP 111 (Judicial Compensation)**

Co-Chairs Sollman and Evans and Members of the Committee:

For the record, my name is Benjamin Souede. I have had the privilege of serving as a Circuit Court Judge in Multnomah County since 2017 and am the current the President of the Oregon Circuit Court Judges Association. I am submitting this letter on behalf of the OCCJA Executive Committee in support of SB 5512, the Oregon Judicial Department Budget, and to focus in particular on Policy Option Package (POP) 111.

Thank you for your support of the judicial branch. Your steadfast support and investment in our justice system and our judges strengthens integrity of the courts and our ability to afford justice to all Oregonians. The Chief Justice and her team have walked you through the critical parts of the budget and have noted areas of priority for funding. This includes the vitally important area of adequate judicial compensation. As you know, in Oregon judicial salaries are set by the legislature in statute, and not by a compensation plan with regular step increases or market-based comparisons.

Today, Oregon's circuit court judges continue to have among the lowest cost-adjusted salary of any state's trial judges. According to the most recent survey conducted by the National Center for State Courts (NCSC), Oregon's cost-adjusted salary for circuit court judges is 50th in the nation.

Oregon's judges do not earn salaries commensurate with the important responsibilities with which they are charged. Oregon's judges are paid substantially less than similarly experienced public sector attorneys in Oregon. Putting questions of fairness to one side, these realities pose a stark and present threat to the continued success and growth of the judicial branch. Our state deserves a judiciary that can recruit from the best, brightest, and most diverse pool of Oregon's lawyers. And it deserves a bench staffed with committed judges who continue to serve deep

into their careers, gaining wisdom and experience as they go and paying those benefits forward with continued service. The current level of compensation makes both recruitment of talented and experience lawyers and the retention of experienced judges very challenging. The resulting trend is troubling. Since 2016, the proportion of OJD's most experienced judges has declined by two-thirds.

To be clear, the state of our circuit courts remains very strong. We continue to benefit from the service of incredibly talented judges throughout this state. Without adequate compensation, however, the reality is that this cannot and will not last.

Judges are tasked with making difficult decisions every day, and doing so in a way that makes every Oregonian who comes before them feel heard and respected and fully accounted for. All of us benefit from and deserve to have judges on the bench with a breadth of experience and sustained passion for the law to handle the important and complex cases that come before them. Our circuit courts are trial courts of general jurisdiction: they hear all criminal and civil cases. These include disputes concerning the custody of children, whether children should be removed from their parents by the state, whether someone is so mentally ill as to require involuntary commitment, disputes between neighbors regarding their property boundary lines, disputes with contractors (and subcontractors) about homes and business buildings, small crimes against property, and the most horrific crimes against people. As a community, we vest our judges with the authority to appoint guardians, interpret election laws, sign search warrants, craft parenting time plans, and issue protective orders. Judges craft conditions of probation to ensure community safety while promoting rehabilitation, and they oversee the details of business and marriage dissolutions that will work for real people who cannot afford attorneys.

Every significant social issue confronting our state runs to and through our trial courts. Our circuit court judges are on the front lines, ensuring fairness and equality to all who appear in our courts. In supporting our judges, you are supporting and strengthening every community in Oregon.

Thank you for hearing my remarks on behalf of the Oregon Circuit Court Judges and thank you for your consideration.

Sincerely,



Benjamin Souede
President, Oregon Circuit Court Judges Association