



## WASHINGTON COUNTY OREGON

Dear Co-Chairs Sollman and Evans, and Ways and Means Public Safety Subcommittee Members,

I am writing to expand on my brief remarks in support of SB 5512, especially the increase in funding it provides to county law libraries (section 7). County law libraries are a vital service that provide local access to legal information to all Oregon residents. ORS 9.815 requires each county to provide a law library or law library services. But what is a county law library?

By example, a patron recently came into our law library whose spouse had left. They thought they needed to file for divorce but didn't know what to do. They didn't have money for an attorney but didn't qualify for legal aid. A professional law librarian showed them resources to help understand the divorce process, the forms on the courts' website, and explained that the Family Law Facilitation Program in the court could help them once they had selected and started working on a form. We also showed them resources in the Law Library with information on divorce, including absent spouses. We help all patrons by referring them to appropriate community resources and finding helpful information in our online and print collections.

County law libraries provide access to legal information and resources to everyone. No one is turned away because of income, whether they have a case or not, whether they are in federal or state court, or if they have a case or issue in another state – or which county they live in. County law libraries routinely help self-represented litigants, lawyers, judges, students, and anyone else involved in, or just interested in, our legal system. Law library staff are critical to selecting materials and providing services.

County law library staff balance the benefits and costs of online and print resources to meet the needs of their communities. Not everything is online, and what is can be expensive. So, we pay for a site license for the community to use to access this resource to keep our costs low, but, when a site license is in use, it prevents other patrons from using that service. One print volume can be taken of the shelf and everything else is still available. Balancing these considerations requires trained professional staff.

Law librarians leverage professional training and local and national law librarian networks to choose appropriate resources and negotiate with vendors. They work with local bar associations and local public libraries to understand and serve their local populations. In Washington County we go out to two public libraries each once a month to provide legal reference services beyond downtown Hillsboro. Unfortunately, current funding for county law libraries is not sustainable.

**Law Library**

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Funding for county law libraries has been frozen since 2011 – when the state legislature took over funding with the unfulfilled promise of maintaining adequate levels to counties for this mandated service. Prior to 2011 county law libraries were funded by an add-on to court filing fees, set within a certain limit by the counties. Filing fee add-ons were removed in 2011 and county law libraries were funded by direct appropriation, passing through the Oregon Judicial Department. The amount determined in 2011 was the average of fees county law libraries received in 2005-2009. The funding level in 2011 was already based on what was adequate two years before, effectively a cut. In every biennium since, county law libraries have received the same as the dollars amount we received in 2011. This means county law library funding was cut by inflation each biennium.

Unfortunately, costs continue to increase due to costs for online subscriptions and materials, salaries and benefits, and overhead, all of which are essential to providing services to non-lawyers, solo or small-firm practitioners, and others who need no-cost access to legal materials. Those cost increases reflect a need of \$10,319,000 (what the 2009 funding level would be in today's dollars). This year's request from the Oregon Judicial Department is a step in the right direction to meeting the long-term sustainable budgets that will keep our doors open and our services accessible to vulnerable Oregonians. This need is illustrated by the situation in Washington County.

The Washington County Law Library, in a better position than some other counties, has been using reserve funds to maintain service levels. With the 2023-25 increase (absent cuts), that fund will now last until the 2025-27 biennium, at which time service levels will be drastically reduced absent funding restored to adequate levels. We do not want to lose services that residents are unable get without county law libraries.

County law libraries provide essential services to community members who cannot get legal assistance elsewhere. We appreciate this necessary increase in funding and look forward to working with the legislature to adequately and sustainably fund county law libraries going forward.

Sincerely,

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P.S. I encourage you to watch a short video we prepared to highlight the value and need for county law libraries in Oregon: [youtu.be/bkQNqTekf0g](https://youtu.be/bkQNqTekf0g).