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IN MY OPINION

Public safety challenges require more funding for prosecutors

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Primus is district attorney of Umatilla County and is the newly elected president of the Oregon District Attorneys Association. He lives in Pendleton.

Oregon is at a pivotal moment for public safety, facing systemwide problems that require systemwide solutions.

While much of the attention has been on providing funding for public defense services, an accountable and well-functioning system requires strong support for courts and prosecutors as well. That funding has not kept up to ensure that prosecutors can meet the expectations of the public.

In Lane County the district attorney's office recently lost six prosecutors in as many months. Across the state to the east, my office in Umatilla County routinely struggles to retain about five prosecutors — only half of the attorneys needed for a full staff. And we're not alone. From Klamath County to Walla, from Clackamas to Multnomah County, district attorneys' offices statewide face a rising shortage of experienced prosecutors.

Historically, state financial support for district attorney services has declined.

Since 2011 the state has stopped contributing toward salaries for deputy DAs, stopped paying witness fees and relied heavily on counties to supplement funding for the district attorney to attract and retain skilled, highly qualified lawyers, victim advocates and support staff. Today, counties fund a majority — about 75% — of district attorney operations, based on a report the district attorneys did for the Oregon Legislature in 2022.

Without increased state investment in district attorney offices, individual counties are left to backfill this funding to



Historically, state financial support for district attorney services has declined, the author writes, putting the burden increasingly on counties to bear. A legislative package aimed at the coming session would help address staffing shortages, cover the costs of providing evidence to indigent defendants and fund support services for victims.

Beth Nakamura, staff file

ensure strong and consistent prosecution of crimes, including reviewing key evidence like police body-worn camera footage, providing adequate advocacy to help crime victims navigate the judicial system and competitive compensation for deputy district attorneys. The burden on county budgets is significant. When they do not have the resources to provide adequate funding, public safety and victim safety suffer.

As the newly elected president of the Oregon District Attorneys Association, I'm proud to support a legislative package of strategic investments that will bolster

prosecution services and help to maintain balance across all branches of the system.

In the 2023 legislative session, we're asking lawmakers to invest \$52 million into district attorneys' offices for the next biennium. These funds would begin to address some of the problems contributing to the statewide prosecutor shortage. They would also resolve pay equity issues of elected DAs and ensure they are paid equally for their work, continue to cover the cost of providing documents and other evidence to indigent defendants and help DA offices keep up with the rising demand for processing case-related video footage

from body cameras.

Importantly, more than half of the \$52 million would go toward strengthening services for crime victims. Crime victim advocates in DA offices provide essential services such as safety planning, help in obtaining protective orders, restitution and crime victims compensation, and support throughout the criminal justice process. They ensure victims' rights are upheld and that district attorneys' offices give them notice and opportunities to weigh in on developments in their cases.

It's worth noting that victim notification services have become even more important and in higher demand due to recent policy decisions and court cases. In addition to an increase in governor commutations, the Oregon State Hospital's continual capacity challenges have led to unexpected releases of defendants held for mental health treatment, and crime victims will need to be notified and supported through the process.

The second biggest piece of our funding request would help counties cover the costs of reviewing and processing video footage from police agencies.

Even the simplest case can result in hours of recorded footage, and these demands are poised to grow as more law enforcement agencies begin using body cameras. Investing now will ensure we can keep up with demand while incentivizing body camera use by law enforcement statewide.

Oregon is at a pivotal moment for public safety, facing systemwide problems that require systemwide solutions. We must value public safety in Oregon and provide equitable access to justice by investing in those responsible for enforcing accountability.