



Date: March 30<sup>th</sup>, 2023  
To: Senate Committee on Judiciary  
From: Jennifer Parrish Taylor, Director of Advocacy and Public Policy for the Urban League of Portland  
Re: Support for Public Defense Reforms, SB 337

Chair Prozanski, Vice-Chair Thatcher, and Members of the Committee,

Thank you for the opportunity to provide testimony in support of Senate Bill 337. My name is Jennifer Parrish Taylor, and I am testifying in my capacity as the Director of Advocacy and Public Policy at the Urban League of Portland. The Urban League of Portland is one of Oregon's oldest civil rights and social service organizations, empowering African Americans and others to achieve equality in education, employment, health, economic security, and quality of life across Oregon and SW Washington.

Fundamentally the problem that we are trying to solve is one of workforce. We agree that increased wages through commensurate pay and ethically manageable workloads are all ways in which we can retain and attract the skilled individuals we need to meet the moment we are in. Higher wages are not only a reflection of how the work being done is valued but by extension how we value the community being served. A community currently that is overly represented by the Black, brown, and mostly poor. I've been doing this work for quite a while and whether it be the state, a company, or non-profit, across the board you can determine their commitment to diversity, equity, and inclusion by how they budget their money.

I want to start with some data which frames how we come to the issue we're discussing today. According to the Equal Justice Initiative, "the United States incarcerates its citizens more than any other country. Mass incarceration disproportionately impacts the poor and people of color and does not make us safer." In Oregon, 9% of incarcerated people are Black, despite Black people accounting for only 2% of the state's residents.<sup>1</sup> According to data from Campaign Zero, "Portland police arrest Black people at a per capita rate 4.3 times higher than white people, the fifth worst in the country. Officers in Portland also kill Black people 3.9 times more than white people."<sup>2</sup> Additionally, "Black drivers made up 18% of the vehicle stops conducted by police in 2019, while 65% involved white drivers. Meanwhile, white people make up 75.1% of the city's population, and Black people make up only 5.8%. The disparity is even higher for non-vehicle stops, where Black people made up 22% of the 2019 stops compared to 62% for white people."<sup>3</sup>

I raise these disparities because it underscores just how important solving this current constitutional crisis is for our communities and how we need to be represented when thinking through and deciding on solutions. Much of the conversation, as it should, has been focused on how we change the service delivery model, centering on the concerns of providers and their needs. Important, absolutely, but I would offer up, that this is not the only perspective that needs to be included when we are considering true systemic change. Audre Lorde once said, "for the master's tools will never dismantle the master's house." How can we expect to effectuate systemic and long-lasting change, if those tasked with that mandate are mostly attorneys?

<sup>1</sup> <https://www.vera.org/downloads/pdfdownloads/state-incarceration-trends-oregon.pdf>

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.opb.org/article/2021/02/07/portland-has-5th-worst-arrest-disparities-in-the-nation-according-to-data/>

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Working on the law does not represent the full spectrum of experience in this area nor is it the sole expertise that should be valued. Our legislative process aspires to make laws that equitably serve us all. But when legislative workgroups, task forces, even commissions, lack diverse voices, the process often creates policies and rules that don't support – or worse, negatively affect – people across the state, particularly Black, Indigenous, Latine, and other Oregonians of color.

Part of the work we do at the Urban League of Portland includes our participation in various task forces, panels, and commissions; we know that if our voice, the voice of our community is not in the room, that that perspective is often left out of the conversation. For us, it is vitally important that those with lived experience, those who are closest to the issue, must be a part of the conversation, decision making, and the solutions that impact us the most. As written Senate Bill 337 does not do that in the way that the drafters intended. In not increasing the total amount of community members with lived experience, the various crises that our state faces often become abstract, with them there, issues are now given a human face and story. Though we are supportive of the bill overall, we do encourage this body to review language related to communities' participation in this commission and on this issue moving forward. If you do not, even with the best of intentions, the impact of the decisions made by the Public Defense Services Commission on our community could be devastating. We know that there will be those who are opposed to the changes that have been outlined today but we cannot afford to wait. You know what the issues are, you have the data from the 6<sup>th</sup> Amendment Center, and now you must act. Justice delayed is justice denied. Maintaining the status quo only maintains the imbalance of power and keeps our communities waiting and change can't wait. We urge you to support Senate Bill 337.

Respectfully,

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