

Submitter: Erin Howell  
On Behalf Of:  
Committee: Joint Committee On Ways and Means  
Measure: SB5506

Co chairs and members of the Committee:

My name is Erin Howell. I am the mother of two small children, and a Multnomah County resident. I have worked for 17 years as a criminal defense investigator, working primarily for attorneys appointed to represent indigent defendants here in Oregon.

I am coming to you today to ask for your support in passing the Office of Public Defense Services budget as submitted, along with Policy Option Package 114.

For years, investigators like me in Oregon have struggled to make a living wage doing our work in Public Defense as the rates paid to investigators have not kept up with the rising cost of living and market changes for investigators.

Defense investigators handling cases that involve potential life sentences for indigent clients are currently paid a mere \$40 per hour - about half of which goes to business overhead costs. In comparison, similar work is available in Federal Indigent Defense cases for \$90 per hour.

As the rates paid to investigators in other markets has increased, it has become increasingly difficult to make a living working on state appointed cases. Although I recognize the importance of the work that I do on state cases, I am faced with the need to stop taking state cases in favor of more lucrative work if rates are not increased.

As more and more investigators leave state appointed work for financial reasons, we recognize that this is only deepening Oregon's public defense crisis. Experienced investigators are rapidly departing, and it is very difficult to recruit and retain new investigators who quickly learn that they cannot make a living doing state appointed work at current rates, especially when more lucrative options are available.

OPDS has put into place a temporary solution, paying a viable rate on certain cases which has helped, but this solution ends on June 1 of this year when the availability of the temporary rates expires. Policy Option Package 114 extends that rate to all cases in the coming biennium, and carries the temporary fix forward as a permanent solution.

My greatest desire is to continue working on appointed state cases so that I can

continue to help attorneys and our indigent clients to access services, and to reach just resolutions in their cases.

I urge you to pass the OPDS budget as submitted along with Policy Option Package 114 in order to create a permanent solution to this element of the public defense crisis in Oregon.

Thank you for your time in coming to Portland and listening to my comments today.

Erin Howell  
Defense Investigator