



Malheur County Sheriff

R. Travis Johnson

David Kesity
Undersheriff

Rachel Reyna
Jail Commander

Rich Harriman
*Emergency Management/
911 Div. Commander*

James St. Mitchell
*Community Corrections
Commander*

January 29, 2025

To: Ways and Means Subcommittee on Public Safety.

Subject: Urgent Need for a New Courthouse in Malheur County

As Sheriff of Malheur County, I am writing to express the critical need for a new courthouse. Our current facility is severely outdated and inadequate, hindering the administration of justice and failing to meet the needs of our community. Overcrowding is rampant, courtrooms are overflowing, and essential security features are lacking. This situation creates delays, inefficiencies, and a disservice to everyone who relies on the court system. Judges are forced to operate in cramped quarters, compromising efficiency and undermining the foundation of a fair and accessible justice system.

Malheur County faces the highest poverty rate in Oregon, exceeding 20%. Access to justice should not be further burdened by economic hardship. Unfortunately, our county cannot afford the immense cost of constructing a new courthouse without significant state investment. I strongly support the Chief Justice's request for \$250,000 in the 2025 Oregon Legislative Session for the planning and design of a new courthouse. This is not merely an investment in a building; it is an investment in the future of the 9th Judicial District and a commitment to delivering justice with dignity and respect.

Malheur County is committed to partnering with the state to expedite the implementation of this vital project. This is a long-term commitment, and we urge you to join us in building a courthouse that reflects the values of Oregon – a place where justice prevails and serves as a beacon of hope for our community.

Current Challenges:

- **Judicial Capacity:** The 9th Judicial District has a severe judicial resource shortage. With only one courtroom suitable for jury trials, we face a 50% deficiency in judicial resources according to the National Center for State Court Workload Study. We essentially need three judges but have the equivalent of only 1.5 courtrooms. This shortage, exacerbated by inadequate infrastructure, significantly impacts our ability to deliver timely justice, as highlighted by the Oregon Criminal Justice Commission in its Senate Bill 337 report.
- **Staff Capacity:** A 14% staff shortage, ranking third worst in the state, cripples the 9th Judicial District. This understaffing is compounded by insufficient space. Our dedicated staff is crammed into inefficient cubicles, hindering their ability to process casework, manage files, and meet privately with the public.



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- **Jury Capacity:** Lacking dedicated jury assembly rooms, potential jurors are forced to mingle in public areas alongside defendants, victims, and attorneys. This raises serious concerns about potential juror bias as they may inadvertently overhear information about other cases.
- **Dependency Needs:** Malheur County has the second-highest rate of dependency case filings per capita in Oregon. Our cramped courtroom makes it difficult to accommodate all parties involved in these crucial child welfare cases, often forcing families and legal representatives to discuss sensitive matters in the open hallway, jeopardizing their privacy and well-being.
- **Cultural Needs:** Our diverse agricultural community includes many non-English speakers. Our court facilities struggle to meet their cultural and practical needs, particularly the need for private spaces for consultations with interpreters and attorneys, and the ability to accommodate larger families.
- **Border Issues:** Ontario's proximity to the Idaho border leads to a daily population surge, straining public safety and court resources. The Oregon Criminal Justice Commission's Senate Bill 337 report highlighted the disproportionate caseload faced by Malheur County judges, emphasizing the urgent need for improved judicial infrastructure.
- **Holding Facilities:** The lack of a dedicated holding room for inmates appearing for trial, including those from the Snake River Correctional Institution, forces us to detain inmates in the jury room – which also serves as the judicial staff lunchroom. This unacceptable situation compromises the integrity of trials and juror safety.

Conclusion:

As Sheriff of Malheur County, I strongly support the Chief Justice's request for \$250,000 for the planning and design of a new courthouse in Vale. This project is an investment in our community's future, ensuring equal access to justice, enhancing public safety, and promoting economic development. I urge you to approve this critical funding request. We are confident that this investment will benefit Malheur County for generations to come.

Sincerely,


Sheriff Travis Johnson

1/30/2025
Date