



WASHINGTON COUNTY CIRCUIT COURT

Dear Members of the Oregon State Legislature:

I am submitting this written testimony in support of HB 3180 requesting \$1.25 million in state matching funds for the courthouse replacement project in Washington County. I am the Chief Family Law Judge in Washington County, and I will leave it to others to point out the fact that we have fewer courtrooms than we do judges, that we need additional judges to meet the needs of our community, and that our current courthouse is not seismically sound. Instead, my testimony today will focus on the real world impact a lack of adequate space has on families in crisis seeking relief at our courthouse.

Washington County is the second largest county in Oregon and it is still growing. In fact, this county has more children than any other county in this state. The need will only continue to grow as our community grows. Currently we only have four judges assigned to family law matters, including protective orders, adoptions and some probate and overflow juvenile matters. We have two other judicial officers who are responsible for the majority of our dependency and delinquency matters involving juveniles. On average our judges responsible for these matters have caseloads of over 600 which is significantly higher than our counterparts in other similarly sized judicial districts. The Oregon Judicial Department estimates we need at least three additional judicial officers to meet our current filings. I anticipate that at least one of those officers would be assigned to either the juvenile or family teams. We have no space for them.

As the mental health, housing, and drug problems our community faces continue to increase the families impacted by these issues will also increase resulting in fewer hours to hear incredibly important matters such as issuing restraining orders, removing a child from a parent's care, and determining an appropriate parenting plan or support order. As the hours we have available to address these cases decrease our most vulnerable community members who need the most court intervention receive less and less.

Additionally, barriers to accessing this building and the resources we do have to assist these families are numerous. We have recently reduced the size of our Family Law Assistance Program office to accommodate other court needs, such as a hearings room used by our volunteer pro tem judges who assist the Court with important dockets like contested restraining and stalking orders, landlord/tenant matters, small claims and probate matters. This lack of space reduces the ability of our staff to meet with self-represented litigants to assist them with filling out and filing necessary family law forms.

There is only one private conference space in the entire courthouse dedicated to attorneys and clients where they can have confidential conversations. Many parties are forced to have delicate and private conversations with their lawyers in crowded hallways, stairwells, and bathrooms. Often victims of crimes and the defendants are mere feet away from each other. This is unacceptable.

Furthermore, parents are often unable to find childcare on short notice and frequently (daily) bring their children to court hearings that are not appropriate for children. Victims of domestic violence seeking a restraining order bring infants, toddlers and elementary age children to the courthouse while they fill out

a restraining order. Then, they meet with a judge to explain, often in graphic detail, the circumstances leading to them seeking a restraining order all while holding a crying child and trying to tell a coherent story. Alternatively, they withhold key details because they do not want to expose their child to those details. In other circumstances, jurors and critical witnesses in all types of cases are often summoned at the last minute or with little notice and are unable to secure childcare. In some cases, court staff are asked or volunteer to watch a child while a parent is participating in court. However, that is not their job and takes them away from their numerous and actual duties.

The Washington County Local Family Law Advisory Committee recognized the need for a drop-in day care facility similar to the facility and program called Court Care in Multnomah County. As the co-chair of this committee, I organized a work group involving various community partners to determine whether we could initiate a similar program here. The answer was an overwhelming YES, but we have nowhere to put such a facility. This project is on hold until we get a new courthouse.

Washington County has recognized the need to prioritize a new courthouse to address the needs of our growing community. With these matching funds, we can plan a courthouse for the future that will allow the families in our community to access our courts with dignity and pride. Thank you very much for your consideration of this bill.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Kelly D. Lemarr', written in a cursive style.

Kelly D. Lemarr, Washington County Circuit Court Judge