

Submitter: Suzanne Swift  
On Behalf Of:  
Committee: Joint Committee On Ways and Means Subcommittee  
On Public Safety  
Measure, Appointment or Topic: HB5031

I strongly support Policy Option Package (POP) 104 in the Governor's Recommended Budget for the Office of Public Defense Counsel, which includes an increase in investigator pay to \$75 per hour as detailed on page 97 of the accompanying presentation.

In 1985, public defense investigators were paid \$25 per hour. When adjusted for inflation, that rate is equivalent to \$75 per hour today. This pay increase is not an arbitrary figure—it represents simply a restoration to the level of compensation our investigators were historically afforded. For decades, our public defense workforce has been paid significantly less than their inflation-adjusted counterparts, creating a persistent economic disparity that must be remedied.

The current pay scale has led to major challenges in recruiting and retaining qualified investigators. Low wages force our agencies to compete in a tight labor market, often resulting in understaffed investigative teams. In many instances, the shortage of dedicated investigators forces attorneys to shoulder investigative responsibilities—tasks that detract from their ability to represent clients effectively and ultimately compromise the quality of public defense services.

Implementing the pay increase will not only help retain experienced investigators but will also attract new talent to a field that is critical to the fair administration of justice. More investigators mean that tasks can be completed by professionals whose focus is solely on gathering and analyzing evidence, enabling attorneys to devote more time to legal strategy and client advocacy. This shift is essential for reducing caseload burdens and improving the overall efficiency of our public defense.

While we appreciate that POP 104 includes this much-needed pay increase, the technical delay that pushes the effective date from July 2025 to January 2026 further postpones progress in resolving Oregon's public defense crisis. Every month without a rate adjustment means continued hardship for investigators and ongoing challenges in meeting the public's legal needs. To remedy these issues swiftly and align our pay structure with both historical standards and modern economic realities, we respectfully urge that the effective date be moved to July 2025.

A timely increase in investigator pay is a critical step toward ensuring that Oregon's public defense system is adequately staffed and fully capable of serving our community. By restoring pay to the inflation-adjusted level of \$75 per hour as established in 1985, we are not asking for a windfall but simply for fairness and the

ability to attract and retain skilled professionals.

Thank you for your time and your commitment to strengthening public defense in our state. I respectfully request that you support implementing the rate increase in July 2025.