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Co-Chairs Broadman and Evans, members of the committee,

I am a public defense attorney in Oregon with 35 years of experience. Over the course of my career, I have worked as a staff attorney for a non-profit public defender organization, co-owned and managed a small law firm, participated in a consortium, and served as a solo practitioner representing court-appointed clients in both state and federal courts.

I am writing to ask you to support the increase in the rate paid to public defense investigators included in POP 104 of the OPDC proposed budget, and to support rapid implementation of the rate change, making it effective in July of 2025.

As you know, Oregon's criminal justice system is compromised by the ongoing public defense crisis. According to OPDC's recent presentations to the Legislature, there are approximately 4,000 unrepresented individuals in the state, and there is a concern that the problem will continue to persist without serious efforts to address the current public defense delivery model. While the Legislature has recognized the need to increase the number of available attorneys, there is a critical need to give more attention to a hidden workforce deficit in public defense: legal investigators. The investigator workforce is dwindling because of inadequate pay. A lack of available legal investigators exacerbates the existing attorney deficit, contributing to higher costs and less desirable case outcomes.

Recruiting and retaining skilled investigators is crucial to addressing the public defense crisis. In my current practice, the need for experienced investigators has never been greater. Effective public defense requires investigators with knowledge and/or expertise in a broad range of areas, including record collection and management, FOIA and public records requests, mobile phone data extraction, computer forensics, social media analysis, and multi-jurisdictional and cross-agency investigations and prosecutions. Additionally, investigators must be adept at interviewing witnesses, locating and verifying evidence, analyzing surveillance footage, and working collaboratively with defense teams to uncover mitigating factors and wrongful prosecutions. Strengthening the investigative resources available to public defenders is essential to ensuring fair and thorough representation for every client.

I strongly urge legislators to support POP 104 and raise the investigator hourly rate to \$75 effective July 2025.

Sincerely,



Laurie Bender  
Attorney at Law  
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