

Submitter: Anne Britton  
On Behalf Of: Letter  
Committee: Joint Committee On Ways and Means Subcommittee  
On Public Safety  
Measure, Appointment or Topic: HB5031

Dear Co-Chair Broadman, Co-Chair Evans, and Members of the Joint Committee on Public Safety,

My name is Annie Britton, and I am a case manager at Multnomah Defenders. I have worked in public defense for 11 months.

I am here today to advocate for investments in nonprofit public defense providers to help address the crisis in access to justice. I am honored to speak. I believe this testimony is valuable because it comes from a unique perspective: that of a former client, now working as a caseworker at Multnomah Defenders in Multnomah County. My role is part of a new and essential integrated system that would have been incredibly helpful to me during my own struggles. I believe that not only do we need to continue funding nonprofit public defenders, but we also need to grow positions to support the hard work and heavy caseloads they carry. Creating systems that address the underlying issues people face will lead to better outcomes for individuals, which, in turn, will create safer communities.

My own personal experience with needing a public defender was while I was struggling with substance abuse, poverty, and the challenges of being a mother. This struggle created significant obstacles for myself, my son, my family, and my community, eventually leading me into the criminal justice system. Clients like me often face the height of their challenges when they are arraigned. I was lost, ashamed, alone, and scared. But I remember being assigned a public defender who was kind and different from other figures in the criminal justice system. During that court appearance, I remember feeling hopeful for the first time.

I am a proud graduate of Multnomah County's START Treatment Court. When my original public defender described these wraparound services to me, I felt a sense of hope I hadn't felt in years—because that attorney saw my value at a time when I couldn't see it myself. Slowly, my life began to change. My son was able to have his mother present, rather than being in prison. I will celebrate 10 years of sobriety on April 6, 2025, and I am deeply proud of my work and of my county for implementing a program that allowed me to become accountable and never commit another crime. I am also incredibly grateful to Multnomah Defenders, which has integrated case managers into their office, allowing me to be part of an incredible organization that has shown me nothing but respect—something I never thought possible as a former client of the system. This work is challenging but incredibly rewarding. The clients I have the privilege of serving are facing many of the same struggles I did in the past, but at an even harder time. Access to treatment and affordable housing is limited, and the drugs they face are more potent and deadly.

In the past year at Multnomah Defenders, I've witnessed an integrated work environment of dedicated and compassionate individuals working tirelessly for clients who are struggling more than ever, largely due to our state's lack of resources in several areas. I fear that the continued underfunding of public defense nonprofits will fail our community, our clients, our families, and our entire state.

I know I never imagined that the criminal justice system would be the catalyst to empower me to change, but it did—and that truly started with the initial discussion with my public defender.

Let's stop pointing fingers at specific areas of our failing system and instead work to become a compassionate, forward-thinking state. A state that works collaboratively while honoring the clients who want to change, become accountable, and succeed in their lives. We all understand what it feels like to fail and feel lost. Public defense teams do more than push people through the system—they find the best outcome for the individuals they work for. They believe in the law, justice, individuals, families, and the communities we all share.

Let's believe in the entire workforce of this system. Let's invest in the dedicated ind