

Co-Chairs Smith & Gorsek, Members of the Committee,

My name is Jessica Snook, and I am a Legislative Assistant IV (LA4). This testimony is my personal capacity and may not reflect the views of my employer.

I have had the pleasure of working in the legislature in various capacities since 2017—only having missed two special sessions. I've served as an intern, working my way up to a Legislative Assistant II (LA2), an office manager of our House Minority Office, chief of me, myself and I running an office by myself for a freshman legislator during COVID and after historic wildfires ravaged our district, and finally a chief of actual staff. At one point during my time as an LA2, I was incredibly grateful to be on payroll for three offices to piece together one salary during interim and continue to gain experience that afforded me the opportunities to grow into my current role. I say all of this to add context to the variety of legislators, staff, and constituents that I've been able to serve in my time at the legislature.

I want to emphasize two points respectfully requesting that the committee evaluate staffing levels to better represent and assist constituents within the districts we serve: trust in government, and government efficiency and effectiveness.

Trust is much easier to lose than it is to earn. Having been born and raised in Southern Oregon, and serving constituencies throughout rural Oregon for my entire legislative career, I can confidently say there is a massive trust deficit among many constituents throughout the state. While my own lens is from that of a Republican, I do not believe this lack of trust is a single party issue.

Some of these constituents turn to the government as an absolute last resort, in the 11<sup>th</sup> hour of a personal crisis. When staff take that call or answer that email, staff must immediately and completely shift gears to assist the constituent to whatever resolution is possible. In these particular cases, there is no ability to take notes and follow up the next day or later that afternoon after the Representative or Senator has been fully prepared for their committee meeting, or after that last minute amendment request has been filed. Had there been trust in government, I believe in many of these cases there would have been outreach for assistance sooner, preventing the situation from escalating to the level of a crisis.

Consistency of staffing allows for trust and rapport to be built with constituents, community leaders, and local organizations. I am grateful that I have built these relationships in previous offices and I still have many of those people stop by my new offices to say hello, ask for advice, and advocate for their cause. After redistricting, even the most tenured legislators had boundary shifts that resulted in getting to know new communities and new constituents where there was, or may still be, a period of needing to build that trust.

I will always remember answering the phone in an office towards the beginning of my legislative career and having a constituent incredibly upset about what was likely a water issue. While I could barely get a word in, when the constituent finally took a

breath, I tried to both sympathize and empathize with them and that was quickly met with a harsh, “You live in Portland! Don’t tell me you understand!” When I informed them that I did not currently, nor have I ever lived in Portland, and was born and raised in Southern Oregon, there was a genuine pause. The constituent then said in a much more mild-mannered tone, “Well, that’s still not my town, but better than Portland.” We proceeded to have a two-way discussion about their issue, instead of a one-way discussion.

Our rural Oregon constituents have a strong perception of what government is and who works in government. Building a level of trust to reshape that perception can frequently take a significant amount of time. There are ninety very different offices that each have appointing authorities who have the ability to staff their offices—within budget constraints—to reflect the needs of themselves and their district to effectively legislate. Starting over on that trust every session by hiring a new LA2 if the previous one was unable to find another source of employment during the interim that allowed them to then return for the next session to that same office can be a hard hit to not only the legislator and their office, but also to the constituents looking for continuity when they engage with our offices.

It is no surprise to anyone on this committee that the legislature tackles large topics that can frequently take multiple sessions to address. When a solution cannot be agreed upon during a session, the legislature has a multitude of options it might invoke to continue to work on the issue: work groups, task forces, passing a study bill, passing a bill to a smaller scope and having a report generated and sent back to the legislature at a future date so the effectiveness of the policy can be reevaluated—the list goes on. With so much incoming information, to truly dive to the depth needed to understand every angle each stakeholder brings to the table, the research already done, and the future implications of the policy, staff need to be constantly building their knowledge base and growing their network of information sources.

Sometimes the bills passed require fixes in subsequent sessions. It makes a big difference to have the understanding of the policy to know how to accurately correct the issue, and watch implementation to know it is being carried out in the way intended. Or, that resulting rulemaking is following the intent of the bill sponsors, or perhaps not overstepping into concerns that were flagged during the legislative process. Additionally, if policy were more thoroughly vetted prior to passage in the first place, there would be less of a need for fixes in future sessions, and ideally there would be less of a need for agencies to craft administrative rules. Providing effective oversight on agencies, commissions, policy implementation, and more, all requires a skillset built through time and the time in the work day to effectively utilize that skillset.

To start from scratch every session as an LA2 learning a new district and new committee assignments, or as the chief of staff to need to impart all of that knowledge on the LA2 you’re tasked with training, while maintaining the other duties of the office, is a significant time investment. Our LA2s are worth investing this time and energy into, and there is a direct benefit to the people we serve by doing so.

I am grateful Oregon has a citizen legislature, and I am not advocating for that to change. How I grew up, “bureaucracy” was a bad word. I believe this stems from a long rooted lack of trust. Our citizen legislature allows for Representatives and Senators to hand pick their staff to build the team they want to serve the district they were elected to represent. Our system should be one that sets legislators and staff up for success to earn the trust of our constituents through consistency and accountability.

As a strong fiscal conservative, I would not be before you today respectfully requesting that the committee evaluate staffing levels to better represent and assist constituents within the districts we serve if I did not believe there was an avenue to increase government efficiency, accountability, and trust by doing so.

Thank you for your time and consideration.