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Legislative Leaders to Join Governor and Chief Justice in Workgroup to Solve Ongoing Public Defense Crisis

Three Branch Workgroup will focus on short-term and long-term solutions

SALEM – In response to the ongoing shortage of public defenders in the state, leaders of Oregon’s legislative, executive and judicial branches will convene a workgroup to develop short-term and long-term solutions to reform the state’s public defense and public safety systems.

The Three Branch Workgroup, co-chaired by Senator Floyd Prozanski (D-Eugene) and Representative Paul Evans (D-Monmouth), will analyze management, financial and structural challenges facing the Office of Public Defense Services (OPDS), and make recommendations for comprehensive reform.

“This is an emergency,” House Speaker Dan Rayfield (D-Corvallis) said. “Oregonians are languishing in jail without access to legal representation, while public defenders have long been underpaid and overworked. The system is broken and lacks the opportunity for effective legislative oversight. This workgroup plan will ensure all three branches of government are working together to make meaningful and long overdue structural reforms so that we can keep our communities safe and ensure that all Oregonians have access to legal representation.”

In February, legislative leaders allocated \$12.8 million to OPDS to increase hiring of criminal defense attorneys to address the growing number of criminal defendants without legal counsel. OPDS, which maintains the statewide public defense system, is housed in the judicial branch and managed by the nine-member Public Defense Services Commission (PDSC).

“There’s no denying that Oregon is going through a public defense crisis,” Senate President Peter Courtney (D-Salem) said. “The Legislature delivered important relief last session, but there’s more work to be done. We cannot afford any delays in justice. This is an attempt to take a run at the issue from all sides.”

“For far too long, the scales have been tipped against public defenders, making it difficult to ensure a fair and just public defense system,” Governor Kate Brown said. “I share the Chief Justice’s sense of urgency in coming together to collaboratively address both short- and long-term solutions, and I am pleased that this workgroup will take on this issue. Together, we will work to ensure our public defense system is fair, just, and ensures every Oregonian can exercise their constitutional right to legal representation.”

“I am grateful for the three-branch commitment to find long-lasting solutions to the long-standing challenges faced by our criminal justice system and those who work in and are served by it,” Oregon Supreme Court Chief Justice Martha Walters said. “With the necessary urgency and a concerted, sustained effort, I know that we can strengthen that system and make it more just.”

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