

Fund public defenders and courts to reduce caseloads and reduce reliance on fines and fees

BACKGROUND

Public defenders play a critical role in our justice system, serving as legal representation to the vast majority of criminal defendants in Oklahoma. A state agency, the Oklahoma Indigent Defense System, funds public defenders in most Oklahoma counties.



The Indigent Defense System is in crisis because funding from the state has not matched the need for years. Caseloads for public defenders have increased 50 percent since 2002. In many counties, public defender caseloads are so large that it can take days or even weeks before a defendant ever sees a lawyer, and many who can't afford bail are forced to spend those weeks in jail.

Amid declining state appropriations, Oklahoma has also repeatedly raised fees to pay for the court system. Now 80 to 90 percent of District Court funding comes from court fees charged to civil litigants and criminal defendants. This creates a perverse incentive for our justice system in which defendants are charged fines and fees to pay for their own prosecution. Because many can't afford to pay these fees, key government functions are severely underfunded and understaffed.

THE SOLUTION

Oklahoma lawmakers should properly fund both our court system and public defenders. This year's revenue growth is an opportunity to properly invest in this core government service.

Providing adequate state funding of courts and public defenders can be paired with reforms to reduce reliance on fines and fees and reduce the burden of fines and fees for those who can't afford to pay. Together these reforms would make the court system function with greater fairness and efficiency while respecting the rights of the accused.

WHAT YOU CAN DO

Contact your state Representative and Senator and urge them to pass reforms to court fines and fees and to properly fund public defenders and the courts. Urge them to provide adequate court funding so that District Attorneys and Public Defenders aren't overworked and are better able to promote justice in Oklahoma.

To join the coalition of Oklahomans working to ensure that our criminal justice system is smarter, makes our communities safer, and gives us the return on our taxpayer dollars that we deserve, visit www.okjusticereform.org. To receive SMS advocacy alerts on important budget issues, text OKJUSTICE to 51555.

You can look up your Senator and Representative on our website under the “Advocacy” tab on our main menu. You can also call the House switchboard at 405-521-2711, and the Senate switchboard at 405-524-0126.



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