

# Oregon Public Defender System Sued

(AP) — Criminal defendants in Oregon who have gone without legal representation for long periods of time amid a critical shortage of public defense attorneys filed a lawsuit Monday that alleges the state violated their constitutional right to legal counsel and a speedy trial.

The complaint, which seeks class-action status, was filed as state lawmakers and the Oregon Office of Public Defense Services struggle to address the huge shortage of public defenders statewide.

The crisis has led to the dismissal of dozens of cases and left an estimated 500 defendants statewide — including several dozen in custody on serious felonies — without legal representation. Crime victims are also impacted because cases are taking longer to reach resolution, a delay that experts say extends their trauma, weakens evidence and erodes confidence in the justice system, especially among low-income and minority groups.

“There is a public defense crisis raging across this country,” said Jason D. Williamson, executive director of the Center on Race, Inequality, and the Law at New York University School of Law, who helped prepare the filing. “But Oregon is among only a handful of states that is now entirely depriving people of their constitutional right to counsel on a daily basis, leaving countless indigent defendants without access to an attorney

for months at a time.”

The lawsuit specifically names Gov. Kate Brown and Stephen Singer, the recently appointed executive director of the state’s public defense agency, and asks for a court injunction ordering criminal defendants to be released if they can’t be provided with an attorney in a reasonable period of time. The lawsuit doesn’t specify what would be considered “reasonable.”

Oregon’s system to provide attorneys for criminal defendants who can’t afford them was underfunded and understaffed before COVID-19, but a significant slowdown in court activity during the pandemic pushed it to a breaking point. A backlog of cases is flooding the courts and defendants routinely are arraigned and then have their hearing dates postponed up to two months in the hopes a public defender will be available later.

A report by the American Bar Association released in January found Oregon has 31% of the public defenders it needs. Every existing attorney would have to work more than 26 hours a day during the work week to cover the caseload, the authors said.

The Oregon complaint focuses on four plaintiffs who have been without

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# Housing Grants Target Needs Federal investments made to address crisis

Oregon will be receiving \$71 million in federal grants from the Department of Housing and Urban Development to tackle various housing issues around the state, Oregon Sens. Ron Wyden and Jeff Merkley announced Monday.

“Housing is a human right, and these federal resources will help to make that right a reality for Oregonians needing a floor under their feet and a roof over their heads,” said Wyden, author of the Decent, Affordable, Safe Housing for All (DASH) Act.

The monies allocated are good step forward to help provide affordable housing statewide, Wyden said, but he indicated there’s more to be done and he promised to continue pushing for an even greater response to the housing crisis.

The Community Planning Development awards include nearly \$35 million for Community Development Block Grants to build and secure decent housing and suitable living environments, and by expanding economic opportunities, principally for low- and moderate-income persons.

The funding includes nearly \$20 million for the HOME Investment Partnerships Program which provides grants for building housing, buying, and/or rehabilitating affordable housing for rent or



U.S. Sen. Ron Wyden

homeownership or providing direct rental assistance to low-income people.

Another \$10 million was allocated for the Housing Trust Fund, giving local governments monies to exclusively produce and preserve affordable housing for extremely low and very low-income households; and another \$2.5 million for the Housing Opportunities for Persons With AIDS program which provides stable and permanent housing assistance and supportive services to one of the most vulnerable populations — low-income people living with Human Immunodeficiency Virus (HIV).

In addition, nearly \$3 million was awarded to the state’s Emergency Solutions Grant program, providing support for first responders helping people in a housing crisis and engaging with people living on the streets.

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