

# New report blasts management of public defense agency

By NOELLE CROMBIE  
The Oregonian

SALEM — The state agency that oversees Oregon's public defense system has trouble executing basic functions like paying lawyers and investigators equitably and on time and lacks a system to hold lawyers accountable for their work.

Those are among the observations included in a new report of the Oregon Office of Public Defense Services. The state hired the Coraggio Group, a Portland-based business management consulting

group, to review the agency.

The report includes scathing comments from the lawyers, investigators and others who work with the office to provide services to indigent defendants across the state.

It comes amid a crisis in public defense in Oregon. Just this month, Metropolitan Public Defender, one of the largest public defender agencies in the Portland area, announced it would temporarily stop taking on misdemeanor and felony cases due to an unsustainable workload and a recent flurry of resignations.

Meanwhile, in Multnomah County alone, about 150 criminal defendants lack an attorney, court officials said Wednesday.

A separate report by the American Bar Association recently found Oregon's public defense system is severely understaffed and needs an additional 1,300 lawyers to meet the demands of the criminal justice system.

The consultants interviewed or surveyed 836 lawyers, investigators, agency staff and others. Their report turned up widespread dissatisfaction with the way the

agency is structured and long and inexplicable delays in getting paid. Others noted that it appears the agency does little to ensure that criminal defendants receive quality representation.

The agency did not immediately respond to a question Wednesday about how much it paid the consultants for the review.

The state administers the public defense system in Oregon. Those services are provided by nonprofit law firms, such as Metropolitan Public Defender, and independent lawyers who take on

public defense cases.

The report highlights comments from those surveyed but does not include their names.

One person urged a complete dismantling of the current system and said it has created caseloads that compromise lawyers' ability to represent their clients.

Another commenter said lawyers at nonprofit public defense agencies are overworked and underpaid.

One participant said: "Meanwhile, the majority of indigent defense providers are, at best, maybe OK at manag-

ing clients but have neither the time nor the incentive to zealously advocate for their individual clients. And there are a great number, if not a majority, of indigent defense providers who are blatantly incompetent and who are still permitted to carry indigent defense caseloads."

The people surveyed in particular criticized the public defense office for its failure to process payments for the lawyers and other contractors. One person surveyed reported spending time fighting the agency to get approval "for the tools I need to do my job."

## Skyrocketing food prices are pinching budgets

By LYNNE TERRY  
Oregon Capital Chronicle

SALEM — Oregonians and some state agencies are grappling with soaring food costs.

According to the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, retail food prices have jumped 8.6% in a year, including a 1% uptick in February. Anyone who's gone shopping has had sticker shock. Those who rely on public food benefits are especially vulnerable to rising prices.

The federal government increased the amount awarded to recipients of the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program, SNAP, in October, but not by much. School districts also have received some extra funding from the U.S. Department of Agriculture, which oversees school food programs.

But the Oregon Department of Corrections, which spends \$1.1 million a month on food, has not received any extra funding.

Officials have adjusted as best they can.

Higher fuel costs, rising freight charges and supply chain issues have driven up the cost of food over the past two years, officials said.

"Everything is driving the cost up," said Ashley Mumm, public relations manager at the Food Bank.



Rachel Alexander/Salem Reporter, File

**Soaring food prices have hit schools, the Oregon Department of Corrections and low-income Oregonians.**

A few examples: In October, a truckload of canned chicken cost \$76,000. Now the price is \$95,000, Mumm said. Last June, a truckload of vegetable oil cost \$30,000. Now it's \$64,000.

The number of people seeking food aid also jumped dramatically once the pandemic hit. Normally, the Food Bank spends \$1 million a month on food. But it had to spend more to meet demand.

"At the peak of a pandemic, we were spending upwards of \$1 million a week on food purchases because of the disruptions to our regular food

sourcing channels, coupled with the significant increase in demand for food assistance," said Jason Stephany, the Food Bank's communications director. "We witnessed unprecedented demand."

The Food Bank received more than \$14 million for food for the 2021-23 budget cycle through the state Department of Human Services. A total of \$12 million came from federal American Rescue Plan funds awarded during the pandemic. The Food Bank was also allocated an additional \$8 million during the recent legislative session. It will use that money

for food and to strengthen its infrastructure, including renovating some warehouses to make them more efficient.

Mumm said that the agency has been able to meet demand in part thanks to donors.

"We had 25,000 new donors last year," Mumm said. "The community is definitely stepping up."

Besides the Food Bank, which serves a network of 21 regional food banks that serve 1,400 food pantries and other programs, the other food assistance programs in Oregon are sponsored by the U.S. Department of Agriculture and administered by the state Department of Human Services.

Last fiscal year, from October 2020 through September 2021, the federal government gave Oregon \$18 million for a program that provides food to families with incomes of no more than about \$3,400 a month for an individual or nearly \$7,000 a month for a family of four. The USDA also gave Oregon nearly \$800,000 to provide monthly boxed allocations of food to those 60 and older.

Money from the federal government has been fairly stable, according to Jake Sunderland, press secretary for the Department of Human Services. He doesn't expect it to rise in the future.

## OSHA plans to revise COVID-19 guidelines

By SIERRA DAWN  
MCCLAIN  
Capital Press

SALEM — Oregon OSHA is updating its COVID-19 workplace guidelines.

In an email to the Capital Press, agency spokesperson Aaron Corvin confirmed changes to workplace rules are coming.

"We expect to initiate rulemaking to make changes to the COVID rule for all workplaces this week," he said.

Asked about farm-specific workplace rules, Corvin said, "As for the COVID rule regarding employer-provided housing, including on farms, it remains in discussion."

An agency memo states that, with the exception of first responders, firefighters, emergency medical services and non-emergency medical transport sectors, Oregon OSHA "will repeal all other remaining industry-specific and activity-specific workplace guidance."

Workplace requirements for "exceptional risk workplaces"—defined by OSHA as workplaces involving direct patient care and similar activities—"will generally remain in place,"

according to the memo, until OSHA has had discussions with stakeholders and Oregon Health Authority. OSHA plans to repeal the remaining requirements "as they become no longer necessary."

Until the new rulemaking is announced, the memo says that Oregon OSHA will not enforce provisions of COVID-19 workplace rules except for the following:

- In general workplaces, the memo says that employers must allow workers to voluntarily use facial coverings and provide facial coverings at no cost to workers.

- Employers also must cover the costs associated with COVID-19 testing if the testing is "conducted at the employer's direction."

In the memo, Oregon OSHA recommends general workplaces should continue to use ventilation systems, follow current quarantine recommendations and give notice to workers who have potentially been exposed to COVID-19 within 24 hours. These recommendations are denoted in the memo with the word "should" rather than "must."

More information will be available from OSHA as the rulemaking unfolds.



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