

2019 Sample Letter to Community Leader - Oregon State Bar

Dear Community Leader:

We write to you today to ask for your public support for an adequate level of funding for Oregon's courts.

All of us were taught that our government has three equal yet separate branches – the executive, legislative and judicial branch. Each branch of government performs a core function necessary for the efficient administration of law and order in our society.

Each branch of government is equally important. Each branch of government is equally necessary. And each branch of government equally shares the responsibility to maintain an orderly society. Unfortunately, in Oregon, the three branches of government are not funded equally.

In recent years, as state agencies were forced to tighten their belts, Oregon's court funding was limited as well. These cuts led to court closures and staff reductions while demand has risen. In the last decade, Oregon laid off court reporters, judicial assistants, and referee judges who handle traffic, small claims, and criminal matters.

Make no mistake – adequately funding Oregon courts is an issue that matters to Oregon businesses and nonprofit organizations. In the hierarchy of cases on the court's docket, the Constitution requires criminal cases be handled first. Next on the list are typically those cases involving child welfare and/or the safety of a person from an abusive situation. Further down on the list are cases like civil disputes, small claims and evictions. If court funding continues to be limited and resources become less available, the courts will be forced to dedicate their resources to cases at the top of the list, which means those cases at the bottom could be even further delayed.

Those cases at the bottom of the list that are typically the ones that impact businesses and nonprofit organizations most directly. Providing inadequate funding will challenge Oregon's already stretched court system by limiting access to justice, and creating an increasingly "wild west" climate where resolution of disputes is unpredictable. Justice delayed becomes justice denied in Oregon. Such increased uncertainty needlessly risks jobs, services, and economic prosperity.

In Oregon, the courts have become more efficient. Our court system today is lean – managing an increasing complex caseload with fewer employees. Like many organizations however, it is not always possible to simply assign more duties to the remaining staff. The courts are making do with fewer resources, but there are limits to how thin resources can be stretched. You can't do 120 hours worth of work in a week if you only have two employees to do it.

Oregon courts must be adequately funded to ensure access to justice to all Oregonians. The public must trust the commitment of their courts to fairness, to the timely and efficient resolution of disputes, and to an open court system accessible to all. Courts ensure public safety, protect vulnerable citizens, and resolve the problems of families in crisis. Even with the addition of new judges and the completed rollout of Oregon eCourt, the courts have reached a point with court closures and reduced staffing numbers where access to justice may no longer exist for organizations or individuals.

During the 2019 Legislative Session, the Oregon State Bar is asking for your commitment to help us restore an adequate level of funding for Oregon's courts.

Thank you for your consideration of these issues.