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**To:** [Martinez, Jacquelynn](#)  
**Subject:** FW: Comment in Support of New Public Defender Case Load Standards  
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**From:** Aleksandrea Johnson <[ajohnson@snocopda.org](mailto:ajohnson@snocopda.org)>  
**Sent:** Monday, October 28, 2024 1:31 PM  
**To:** OFFICE RECEPTIONIST, CLERK <[SUPREME@COURTS.WA.GOV](mailto:SUPREME@COURTS.WA.GOV)>  
**Subject:** Comment in Support of New Public Defender Case Load Standards

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Dear Honorable Justices:

Justice and the constitution calls for the Court to adopt these new case load standards – to ensure effective assistance of counsel for our indigent, marginalized communities. I strongly urge you to adopt the proposed workload standards.

I have been a public defender in Snohomish County for the past four years. I went to law school knowing that I wanted to be a public defender. I knew what the job entailed after I interned with the Washington Defender Association and the King County Department of Defense – that it would be stressful, overwhelming. That I would have to build strong boundaries. There is no way that anyone can prepare for the rewarding but crushing weight of being a public defender.

I am incredibly lucky to work for an office that has worked very hard to create a strong community of support to try to make this work sustainable. But at the end of the day, this is a systemic problem not just in King County, but across the State. Even in an office that provides these resources, I have felt the crushing weight of the caseload and the time that it takes to effectively defend a case. It's not just the workload, it's the emotional toll of this job.

In my last four years, I have had at least one-two mental health crises per year brought on by stress. When my felony caseload and in custody client list was at its height at the beginning of the year, I was struggling to manage. I was barely able to meet with clients let alone review discovery. I was constantly at the jail or at court. I was still getting new case assignments every week. I was going through a divorce and struggling with balancing both my personal mental health and the emotional toll of the job. I felt like I could barely keep my head above water – I didn't have enough hours in the day to handle my caseload *and* my declining mental health. In the middle of the most intense part of this period, one of my clients overdosed in the Snohomish County Jail. The effect of that secondhand trauma next to the high caseload made me realize that I couldn't be the lawyer I wanted to be at that time. Instead of quitting this job, I took a month long FMLA.

I'm very fortunate that I have an office that was able to support me through that and that I was able to come back after time. Many others I know have had to make the difficult choice to stay and

continue to work despite those concerns or to leave the job. With the standards already in place, we are asking lawyers to make the decision: prioritize myself, my family and my mental health or prioritize an important and necessary job in spite of detriment to body and mind. This is why it is difficult to recruit people interested in criminal defense to public defense. This is why we are seeing an exodus of lawyers. The proposed changes are a meaningful step to allow attorneys to take care of themselves and their clients.

Another very beneficial aspect of the proposal is that it provides standards for all defenders – specifically social workers and investigators. These roles are critical to providing holistic legal representation. The overload in attorney caseload trickles down to our staff, our investigators, our social workers. These standards assure that public defenders have everything they need in order to effectively prepare for trial, negotiate cases, provide meaningful mitigation and release planning.

Much of the opposition to these proposals cite funding concerns and speculate that these changes will cause “vigilante justice.” First, the court should not concern itself with funding issues – that is clearly left for the legislature and counties. What the court should concern itself with is whether what is happening in our state is in line with what the constitution demands. It should concern itself with whether members of our community are receiving effective assistance of counsel. It should concern itself with the well-being of the attorneys that come before the court everyday. Second, the proposition that crime will increase is not founded. In fact, having attorneys that have less cases and more resources will likely make speedier trials and resolutions because they will have more time to spend on each case they are assigned. This is nothing more than inflammatory rhetoric.

The status quo is not okay. We should strive to set our community members going through the system with the legal representation they deserve – qualified lawyers with a manageable caseload who have the time and resources to give the time and attention to carefully research, review discovery, prepare for resolutions or trial, and so on without sacrificing their wellbeing ; who have access to quality investigation which our state constitution demands to provide effective assistance of counsel; who have access to staff support to assist in the many demands of the job; to provide social workers who can provide additional community support. These cases numbers are not numbers representing people accused of crime – they are members of our community. They deserve to have qualified, well-equipped lawyers who are not overwhelmed, exhausted, and struggling to get by day-to-day. Please adopt the proposed standards.

Sincerely,

**Aleksandrea Johnson** (she/her)

*Staff Attorney*

Snohomish County Public Defender Association

2722 Colby Ave., Ste. 200

Everett, WA 98201

Phone: (425) 339-6300 ext. 522

Cell/Text: (425) 471-3616

Fax: (425) 339-6363

[ajohnson@snocopda.org](mailto:ajohnson@snocopda.org)

**Legal Assistant:** Chi Emeka

Phone: 425-339-6300 ext. 484

[cemeka@snocopda.org](mailto:cemeka@snocopda.org)

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