

October 30, 2024

Washington State Supreme Court

P.O. Box 40929 Olympia, WA 98504

Subject: Proposed Revised Standards for Indigent Defense and Caseload Limits

Chief Justice Gonzalez and Associate Justices:

I am voicing my concern and opposition to the recently proposed rule change concerning reductions in indigent defense caseload standards. I request that the Court reject the proposal as it does not address several factors.

I have been a certified police officer for more than twenty-five years and a major crimes investigator for the last fourteen years. I understand and appreciate the need for a zealous public defense system for those accused of crimes in Walla Walla County and across Washington State. Public defenders play a crucial role in protecting citizens' constitutional rights within a criminal justice setting. If there is a problem within the public defense system, then it is the responsibility of both the State and the Court to consider viable options for addressing the issues. However, a blanket reduction in caseload standards simply cannot be the solution Washington State considers.

The proposal to reduce the workload by public defenders ignores some very basic facts. There are not enough public defenders in the state and specifically in my community to handle the dispersal of cases. The result will be the dismissal of cases that will undoubtedly put those who commit crime back into the community without any accountability or any chance for rehabilitative services. All stakeholders, those opposed to the proposed rule change and those against it, can agree that rehabilitative services are crucial in reducing recidivism. This is profoundly unjust to the victims and the community at large, and will surely lead to increased crime in my community and the state. There is not enough funding earmarked to hire additional public defenders. Citizens of my community are already paying extraordinary amounts of taxes, including sales tax, property tax, and utility taxes. Unless the state is willing to make drastic cuts to other programs to help subsidize the rule change, there are few other means of funding sources available.

We simply must come up with an alternative solution that allows for a balanced approach that takes into account the rights of the accused, the safety and security of victims and communities, and the need to safeguard the integrity of the criminal justice system. Surely, there is a more reasoned approach that will allow for all three of those goals to be met without such drastic measures and no safety net in place.

I respectfully ask this Court to reject the proposed rule change and work with stakeholders to find a productive way to address the concerns underlying the proposal.

Sincerely,

Christina Ruchert