

Dear Honorable Justices,

I am writing in support of adopting the proposed court rule to codify the WSBA's Criminal Caseload Standards for Public Defenders. I believe this is a much-needed change that will benefit all public defense professionals and, most importantly, the indigent communities we serve.

I have worked for the Snohomish County Public Defender Association since 2020, first as a Law Office Assistant and now as the supervisor of that unit. I feel so proud of the work we do every day and see this as a lifelong career for myself. The people who choose to work in this area of law are intelligent, passionate, and incredibly hard-working. My colleagues have a high standard for themselves and their work, and this creates tension as our current caseloads make it very challenging to achieve those standards on a daily basis.

At this moment, I am aware of attorneys in my office who have 90+ active case assignments on their plate. These attorneys are constantly moving between court and the office, holding client meetings and negotiating with prosecutors – meanwhile, their other clients are calling and leaving voicemails, only connecting with their assigned attorney on the days they're not actively preparing for (or in) trial. Taking these calls is frustrating – people feel let down by this system, their cases dragged out for months and months, their pending charges complicating their lives and threatening their liberty, income, housing, and relationships. They feel they are not getting the same quality of representation they'd have if they could hire private counsel; not because their attorney is not capable of providing that level of representation, but because they're not given the proper time or support to allow for it.

In terms of demands on time, the landscape has changed, and our standards must reflect that. For one thing, the volume of discovery we receive for each case has increased dramatically in recent years. While the implementation of body worn cameras has been an important step toward accountability for law enforcement in Washington State, it has also meant many additional hours of discovery review for public defenders. We have had simple misdemeanors come in with 6+ hours of body worn camera footage. Reviewing discovery as thoroughly as possible is crucial to our work – we need more time for each case. We need lower caseloads.

I am asking the Washington State Supreme Court to acknowledge the importance of this work and the fact that our current caseloads are not sustainable, but rather harmful to us and our clients. Every Washingtonian is entitled to (and deserves) a dedicated defense when they are accused of a crime – I also believe the professionals who dedicate their lives to public defense deserve the time and the bandwidth to do their best work, to work toward the outcomes that most benefit our clients.

Thank you for your attention to this issue, I greatly appreciate your time and consideration.

Sincerely,

Cierra Tollefson-Purdom, Law Office Assistant Supervisor

Snohomish County Public Defender Association