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Subject: FW: Public Comment re: Standards for Public Defense
Date: Thursday, October 31, 2024 8:03:59 AM

From: Roman, Hannah <Hannah.Roman@kingcounty.gov>
Sent: Wednesday, October 30, 2024 5:08 PM
To: OFFICE RECEPTIONIST, CLERK <SUPREME@COURTS.WA.GOV>
Subject: Public Comment re: Standards for Public Defense

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I write to ask you to adopt the proposed caseload standards for indigent defense. I have worked in public defense in King County for over nine years now, and I have watched as many dedicated, skilled, and effective attorneys have left this work. I know that the decision to leave public defense is not an easy one. It almost always comes after months or years of soul-searching, because this work is a calling for most of us. The decision to leave is prompted not merely by the challenge of maintaining what we have come to call “work-life balance” but by the frustration and the heartbreak of seeing the toll our workload takes on our clients, and by the feeling that we are complicit in violations of our clients’ constitutional rights because we simply cannot get a case ready for trial within anything close to a statutory timeframe. There can be no question that the massive amount of discovery we must now catalogue, review, and assess in serious felony cases, and the need to find experts to help us assess it, results in delays that should be shocking to the conscience. I think these delays have become so normalized that other actors in the criminal legal system—judges, prosecutors—are inured to them. But for us, it does shock the conscience. We see the pressure these delays put on our clients to plead guilty to crimes they might otherwise choose to take to trial, or might be in a better position to negotiate. We want to give our clients the representation they deserve and are entitled to. But we cannot do it without lower caseloads. There are a lot of reasons people leave public defense work; but I strongly believe it is the emotional toll of being thwarted, of trying and failing to give our clients the kind of representation that money can buy, not because of a lack of skill or a lack of will but because there simply are not enough hours in a day to do what must be done, that has driven so many of my colleagues out of this work. I realize that you are not tasked with protecting the well-being of public defenders; but you are tasked with protecting the constitutional rights of indigent defendants, and I hope you will see that lowering caseload standards is necessary in order to do so.

I appreciate the careful consideration I know you will give to this decision.

Hannah Roman

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