

Dear Washington Supreme Court,

I am writing to express my strong support for the proposed updates to the Indigent Defense Standards. I have worked as admin staff for the Snohomish County Public Defender Association for the past 3 years. I love this job and this Association. I also see how the stresses of the job affect not only myself but everyone I work with.

The attorneys and staff I work with are incredibly caring and incredibly competent. They fight hard for our clients and want to provide them with the best possible representation. I am proud to work with such passionate and fierce defenders. They're also dealing with extremely high caseloads and an amount of work that I suspect most people would find unimaginable. The impact of this is more than just the time the job takes away from people's personal lives and families. There's an emotional toll to each of these cases that can't be understated. I deal with clients in a much less direct and personal way than my attorneys do, and I still struggle to not take this job home with me. The stories I've heard and encountered affect me beyond my work hours, and I cannot imagine how much more so they must affect the attorneys, investigators, and social workers in my office who are much more directly involved in their client's situations. High caseloads overload attorneys and support staff with not just the time the job takes, but with more emotional weight everyone has to carry. This is a perfect scenario for burnout, and I think that shows with the attrition rates in public defense. Lowering caseloads would help relieve the pressure.

Much has been said about the difficulty that public defense has with recruiting. With current standards, I'm not sure it should be surprising that the field is less desirable to some. Improving quality of life for defenders by lowering caseloads would make the field more appealing to young attorneys looking for their career path while also reducing burnout for people already in the field, thereby improving current attrition rates. Reduced caseloads would finally give us the ability to reliably attract people to this field and maintain defenders in the long term.

From a staff perspective, I have found myself so used to being the kind of busy where taking a break sounds unimaginable that I often feel as though I've been unproductive on days when I just had a reasonable amount of work. I've heard similar stories from friends and coworkers in this office, that if they don't feel like they're running around all day, they don't feel productive. This is not something that's natural to feel; the needs of the job have trained us to feel this way. This is not sustainable. I look around at my coworkers and at myself, and I am concerned about burnout every day. I want to make this work my career long term, but I need to know that I can do so and still have a life outside of the office.

Moving into a supervisory role, I'm now faced with how best to support my team members and make sure that their jobs are sustainable as well. Supporting institutional change is, in my opinion, the best way to make this the kind of job where people stay around. No amount of pizza parties or supportive talks or random acts of kindness can make up for the sheer amount of work that is often placed on the shoulders of my team, and improving the standards is the best way to make sure that these truly excellent employees feel that this is an office where they can make a career.

Thank you,

Lee Michel

Legal Secretary Supervisor

Snohomish County Public Defender Association