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Subject: FW: Defense Workload Standards
Date: Monday, October 21, 2024 11:41:10 AM

From: Peggy Steffener <psteffener@snocopda.org>
Sent: Monday, October 21, 2024 11:35 AM
To: OFFICE RECEPTIONIST, CLERK <SUPREME@COURTS.WA.GOV>
Subject: Defense Workload Standards

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Honorable Justices of the Washington State Supreme Court
Temple of Justice
Email: supreme@courts.wa.gov.

Dear Justices of the Washington State Supreme Court,

Subject: Support for the 2023 National Public Defender Workload Standards

I believe it is imperative to adopt the proposed 2023 National Public Defense Workload Standards. I have been a team member at the Snohomish County Public Defender Association since September 2002 starting as a Law Office Assistant and moving up to a Legal Assistant and then Paralegal. For much of that time I, and each of my legal assistant team have had as many as 18 attorneys on our caseload at any one time. My job is to support my attorneys, but also to advocate for our clients. I have seen how, even with the best of intentions, clients haven't received the attention that they require leading to feelings of animosity, anger, distrust or a complete break-down of the attorney/client relationship and in worse cases, even leading to the client spending a longer time in custody.

I have loved my position as a Defender, and there is nowhere else that I would want to be. However, I have seen first-hand how weighed down attorneys and staff are by the heavy caseloads and responsibilities they carry. This is true for every unit at the Snohomish County Public Defenders Office. Attorneys, social workers and investigators often work late, foregoing friends and family. They miss important events in their children's lives because of the enormous responsibility they feel to provide the best representation possible for our clients. Staffing in every unit of our organization has increased, and yet not kept up with the amount of work to be done. The expectation that a client should receive the best legal representation that an attorney can give requires that the attorney spend hours upon hours taking into

account all of these pieces of the puzzle to make that holistic representation possible.

The proposed standards have the potential to rectify many infirmities and inadequacies in the system as it currently exists.

We need improved standards for all roles at public defender offices and agencies, as administrative staff, investigators, social workers, technical support, and HR are all vital components in a public defense system. Non-attorney positions are indispensable parts of the process, not luxuries. By short-staffing these roles, the jurisdictions that pay for public defense services risk paying attorneys (the highest-paid employees at a defender office) to answer phones, set up computers, and do clerical tasks, etc, which while necessary to be done do not require a lawyer (not to mention that lawyers are not trained and are not skilled at filling these roles).

Realistic and sensitive caseload standards for attorneys are also vital for a myriad of reasons: most importantly, the quality of the service we give to our clients (and thereby to the community in general) hinges on the amount of time, attention, and energy we can give to a case; there are limited hours in our days, weeks, and years, and it is simple math to show that higher caseloads mean lower quality work for any given case or client.

Please consider this input and adopt the new proposed standards.

Thank you for your consideration.

Sincerely,
Peggy Steffener
Paralegal
Snohomish County Public Defender Association
2722 Colby Ave Suite 200
Everett WA 98201

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