

Washington State Supreme Court  
The Honorable Chief Justice Steven C. González  
P.O. Box 40929  
Olympia, WA 98504

October 31, 2024

Dear Justices of the Washington State Supreme Court:

I am writing to encourage adoption of the proposed changes to the caseload standards for public defenders in Washington State.

I became interested in public defense prior to even entering law school. I was lucky enough to attend a law school with a robust support program for students interested in public defense which only increased my dedication to that career path. After graduation, I worked for 7 years as a public defender in Western Washington. Under the current caseload standards, I was qualified for all felony cases. I have experience as lead counsel on a variety of Class A felony cases and spent over a year representing individuals in RCW 71.09 civil commitment proceedings.

I did not leave public defense because I was no longer interested in the work or dissatisfied with my salary. I left public defense because the work was becoming utterly unsustainable. I am not alone in that experience. If action is not taken, the field of public defense will continue losing experienced attorneys to burnout and stress.

I could name over a dozen attorneys I know personally who left public defense offices in Washington due to stress, unmanageable caseloads, and a lack of resources. I also know multiple current public defenders who are planning to leave the field of public defense soon due to stress, unmanageable caseloads, and a lack of resources. Many of them are qualified to represent the most serious of cases. This harms the citizens of Washington. A large majority of criminal prosecutions brought by the State of Washington target indigent defendants who require appointed counsel.

Public defenders leaving due to stress and overwhelming caseloads take their experience and knowledge with them. It does not just mean they themselves are no longer available to represent clients. It also means they are not available to mentor and provide case assistance to less experienced colleagues. It impedes the ability for newer public defenders to become confident in their practice and gain valuable experience themselves.

This is a trend that can be fixed. Implementing the proposed caseload standards is integral. It will help ensure experienced attorneys remain in the field. It will help ensure knowledge and experience is shared so that newer attorneys can improve on their

practice. It will provide continuity for defendants who far too often must deal with cases being transferred from attorney to attorney due to public defenders leaving their positions. Decreasing caseloads means more time spent on individual cases which will help reduce wrongful convictions. It also will encourage law students to consider public defense in Washington as a viable career path.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Sarah Johnson', with a long horizontal flourish extending to the right.

Sarah Johnson WSBA#50985

(These comments are my own personal opinions and not those of any current or former employer.)