

**From:** [OFFICE RECEPTIONIST, CLERK](#)  
**To:** [Martinez, Jacquelynn](#)  
**Subject:** FW: Public Comment on Suggested Amendments to Standards for Indigent Defense Services  
**Date:** Monday, September 23, 2024 1:55:20 PM

---

---

**From:** Alonzo, Selena <salonzo@kingcounty.gov>  
**Sent:** Monday, September 23, 2024 1:45 PM  
**To:** OFFICE RECEPTIONIST, CLERK <SUPREME@COURTS.WA.GOV>  
**Subject:** Public Comment on Suggested Amendments to Standards for Indigent Defense Services

**External Email Warning!** This email has originated from outside of the Washington State Courts Network. Do not click links or open attachments unless you recognize the sender, are expecting the email, and know the content is safe. If a link sends you to a website where you are asked to validate using your Account and Password, **DO NOT DO SO!** Instead, report the incident.

Good afternoon,

I am writing to support the proposed court rule amendments to codify the WSBA's recently passed Standards of Indigent Defense.

I have been a public defender for 5 years. I started my career at the Maryland Office of the Public Defender and came to King County in October of 2021. I am now a Class A felony attorney practicing in King County Superior Court. When I was a public defender in Maryland, I touched 1600 cases in two years. I say that I "touched" them because the representation we provided in Maryland was pure triage and, undoubtedly, constitutionally ineffective. While in Maryland, I was nothing more than a cog in the machine who processed cases and kept the conveyor belt moving. I met clients for the first time on their trial date and took dozens of cases to trial after only 30 minutes of talking with clients. I had dockets of 20-30 clients every single day. I would go home every night and work until midnight most nights. I would cry from the sheer stress every single week, sometimes every single day. I was sick constantly. My personal relationships suffered. I left Maryland because I knew I could not work in those conditions anymore and because I thought King County would provide a more sustainable practice. For a while, King County was better – anything is better than that. But now, as a Class A felony attorney, I see that we are approaching a breaking point that will soon make the representation that we provide even worse than what we did in Maryland.

My colleagues in Maryland have no more than 50 open felony cases. My current case load is 78 felonies. Off the top of my head, I cannot remember how many murders I have on my caseload. That is not okay. I have 19 clients currently in custody, split between the jail in downtown Seattle and the jail in Kent. Currently, I am in trial which means my Monday-Thursday from 9-4:30pm are occupied. This means that the only time I have to work on my other 77 cases are at night, the weekends, and Friday. This Friday, I will start my morning at 7:30am with 45 minutes to work on my cases. I will go to court at 8:15am and hope to be out by 9am so I can go see two clients in the downtown jail from

9-11am. I will then drive to Kent which takes an hour, I will take a call with an expert on the way, I will visit two more clients in jail in Kent, I will drive back to Seattle which takes another hour, and I will sit in on a defense interview until 4pm. I will not have time to eat a real lunch. I will not have time to see my other 15 clients in custody. I will not have time to answer the dozens of calls and texts that inevitably come from my other clients. I will have 1 hour left in the working day to review hundreds of hours of body worn video, respond to dozens of emails, continue to prep for my trial, and prepare for the following week. This job as we currently practice is not humanly possible. We are being driven to the brink and we are embarrassingly behind many states who prioritize the constitutional right to an effective criminal defense attorney more than Washington does.

There is a real human cost to the archaic caseload standards we currently practice under. I went to law school to be a public defender. I was the first in my family to go to college. I went to Amherst College. I was the first in my family to go to law school and I graduated from the University of Michigan Law School. I did not take this job because I couldn't get anything better; I took this job because I think our purpose in life is to use our privilege to make this world a better place. I became a public defender because many people in my family have been incarcerated and have been represented by attorneys who did not have the time or desire to fight for them. I fear that these current standards are making me into the attorney who failed my family. I think about leaving this job at least once a month because it is so unsustainable. In every felony trial I've been in, I've gotten sick because of the immense stress. I have started to lose my hair due to the stress of this job. My one hobby is running marathons because the only time I can truly separate myself from this job is when I am running for 16, 18, 20, 26 miles so all my body can think of is putting one foot in front of the other and not my cases. I have to go to therapy to process the endless moral injury we are subjected to in this job. I am not alone in these thoughts. At every happy hour, my friends and I talk about how much longer we can possibly do this. We are the human cost to these excessive caseloads. But we are the attorneys, we get to go home to our beds, our warm meals, our paychecks. Our clients are the ones who suffer even more.

Although they may be accused of crimes, although they may have previous convictions, although they may be in jail, they are still human beings who deserve to be treated as such. They are people who deserve the effective representation guaranteed to them by the Constitution. If I spent each week only visiting my clients in jail, it still wouldn't be possible to see them all. A visit to the jail is not a simple in-and-out exercise. At the jail downtown, I often wait 45 minutes for my client to come out to see me. It never takes less than 20 minutes. It takes me an hour to even get to the jail in Kent. It is not right that I do not have time to visit my incarcerated clients and keep them up to date on their case. They have to settle for a visit every 2 weeks, if even that. In the meantime, they remain incarcerated. They lose their homes, their shelter beds, their benefits – that is the human cost of excessive caseloads. Meanwhile, while I do my best to triage my in-custody cases, my out of custody clients wait months, sometimes years, for their cases to resolve. The pending charge stays on their record and they are turned down opportunities for jobs or housing – that is the human cost of excessive caseloads. When carrying 78 felonies, it is impossible to properly prepare a case, to catch all the issues, to litigate everything that needs to be litigated. People go to prison when we make mistakes, children don't grow up with a parent when we make mistakes, our clients have relatives die while they wait for their case to go to trial – that is the human cost of excessive caseloads.

We should not accept this system. The opponents of the new caseload standards say we should be lauded for choosing a career in public defense but yet they turn a blind eye to the human cost that refusal to adopt these new standards will continue to exact on attorneys and our clients. Our clients are people who despite their past and despite what they are charged with, are still human beings who deserve more than being railroaded by our current system.

I thought I could make a career out of this. It is all I've ever wanted to do. But, with the current system as it is, I'll be lucky if I can last 5 more years to get my loans forgiven. There is a lot of talk about public safety from the opponents of these new caseload standards. Putting the onus of solving public safety problems and the problems of our very broken criminal justice system on public defender caseload standards is misplaced. We can both enact new caseload standards and continue to work for reform in other areas to ensure public safety. Passing these standards will allow public defenders to properly work their cases so that they are not stagnant for years. This means that victims will also not have to wait years for a resolution. These standards have been developed by a group consisting of e RAND Corporation; the National Center for State Courts (NCSC); the American Bar Association (ABA) Standing Committee on Legal Aid and Indigent Defense (ABA SCLAID); and Stephen F. Hanlon, Principal, Law Office of Lawyer Hanlon. They are well thought out and ensure that attorneys can meet their constitutional obligation – an obligation that is a mandate, not a mere suggestion.

I urge the Court to adopt these standards to ensure that the representation provided in the State of Washington is in accordance with the rights afforded under the United States Constitution.

Sincerely,

Selena Alonzo (she/her)  
Felony Attorney; TDA Division  
King County Department of Public Defense