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Subject: FW: Support of Change in Public Defense Caseload Standards
Date: Friday, October 18, 2024 11:09:14 AM

From: Tamara Comeau <tcomeau@snocopda.org>
Sent: Friday, October 18, 2024 11:08 AM
To: OFFICE RECEPTIONIST, CLERK <SUPREME@COURTS.WA.GOV>
Subject: Support of Change in Public Defense Caseload Standards

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Hello,

I am an attorney with Snohomish County Public Defender Association. I write this email in support of the court adopting the proposed amendments to CrR3.1/CrRLJ3.1/JuCR9.2 STDS as recommended by the Washington State Bar Association Board of Governors.

I went to law school to become a public defender. I envisioned a future of helping people navigate the criminal justice system and being a voice for those whose voices are often suppressed in our communities. I have worked at several different public defense agencies/organizations during my relatively short legal career. I interned at King County Department of Public Defense and worked at Pierce County Department of Assigned Counsel, Snohomish County Public Defender Association (SCPDA), and did public defense for the City of Lakewood.

When I started criminal misdemeanor public defense at SCPDA in early 2021, I began to encounter the impacted system. My workload became unbearable. I quickly learned that I could either have my physical/mental health OR I could be an effective attorney for my clients. I found this in other attorneys as well — they either were unable to show up for all of their clients or were struggling with taking care of themselves. In late 2022, I decided to leave public defense due to not wanting to sacrifice my wellbeing any longer. I moved to private civil litigation with the goal of having better work/life balance. Near the same time I left, I knew of several other public defenders who quit as well to move to private civil litigation because public defense was unsustainable. I had resolved that public defense was not a life-long career for most people because it was an impossible job. The public defenders I know today are overworked and doing everything in their power to balance showing up for their clients versus showing up for themselves. The current standards force strong attorneys to choose different careers in an effort to preserve their wellbeing.

The proposed standards represent a possibility of being able to be effective attorneys and also

have the space to be healthy individuals. The proposed standards represent a world where indigent people involved in the criminal justice system actually receive adequate representation.

I push back at those who say we can't afford this change. If we agree that defendants in the criminal justice system have the constitutional right to an *effective* attorney under the 6th and 14th Amendments to the US Constitution, then the question is not whether we can afford it. If we find that the current standards do not afford defendants effective attorneys, then we must make the change that will afford such effective counsel. I believe the State should contribute more significantly to the costs of such changes instead of relying so heavily on counties.

I ultimately returned to public defense at SCPDA two months ago. Part of my decision to return was the hope I have that this Court will adopt the proposed standards. Our clients need us and need smart and dedicated attorneys to represent them. They deserve an actual attorney, not just the idea of one that our current standards seem to afford. I urge this Court to adopt the proposed standards.

Thank you,

Tamara Comeau (she/her)
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