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Subject: FW: Support for Public Defense Caseload Standards.
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From: Taylor Severns <tseverns@snocopda.org>
Sent: Tuesday, October 22, 2024 12:15 PM
To: OFFICE RECEPTIONIST, CLERK <SUPREME@COURTS.WA.GOV>
Subject: Support for Public Defense Caseload Standards.

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Hello,

I strongly support the new public defense caseload standards. I have been proud to be a public defender since passing the bar exam in the fall of 2019. In those 5 years, I have worked with clients in misdemeanor cases, RALJ appeals, folks detained under the Involuntary Treatment Act, and currently am a Class A-qualified felony attorney. The proposed caseload standards are critical to not only sustaining public defense but continuing to elevate the standard of public defense practice. It is not enough that an accused has an appointed attorney. That attorney must be effective. Otherwise, all our State and Federal Constitutional promises of equal protection and due process are empty.

What many people outside of the legal profession, or maybe even outside of criminal law, do not realize is that a sustainable--and just--caseload is far more than just the number of clients or cases assigned to a particular attorney. Certain cases require more time due to highly technical evidentiary issues (this includes misdemeanor DUIs), or even just the sheer amount of evidence to review and evaluation. For example, the widespread adoption of body-worn cameras also adds hours of discovery review to even the simplest of theft cases involving one or two officers. In cases involving 10 or officers, over prolonged periods of investigation or client contact, that can add up to dozens of hours reviewing body camera evidence alone for a single case. The proposed caseload standards take this kind of thing into account.

Beyond the time required for investigation and litigation is the time spent with clients and the emotional toll that this work takes. In addition to reviewing difficult discovery, people in the criminal legal system struggle not only with poverty, but also serious mental illness, addiction, and/or trauma from the harms they have experienced. It is hard to overstate the psychological burden this places on a public defense team. The proposed caseload standards will help ensure that each client receives the care and attention they deserve while reducing the secondary trauma and moral harm that comes from feeling that you do not have the time or resources to do enough for a case. That in turn will prevent attorney burnout.

A fair and just caseload standard, such as the one before this Court, ensures that public defense is a sustainable career path for attorneys. We need more public defense attorneys, and specifically, we need more highly qualified and dedicated public defense attorneys. Reasonable caseloads and pay will make this work more attractive to those potential attorneys.

Each and every person in Washington deserves a dedicated and effective attorney, regardless of their ability to pay. In a time where local governments are turning back the clock to revive discredited, ineffective laws that only serve to criminalize poverty, mental illness, and addiction while providing no meaningful services to address those very issues, this could not be more critical.

Sincerely,

Taylor A. Severns
(She/Her)

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