

April 30, 2025

RE: Letter in Support of Revisions to the Appellate and Family Defense Indigent Defense Standards

Dear Justice Stephens and members of the Supreme Court:

I write in support of the revisions to the Indigent Defense Standards. For too long, appellate and family defense attorneys have been forced to compromise on their caseloads, which has impacted the quality of justice in Washington.

I am a long-time appellate defender and the former chair of the WSBA Council on Public Defense. I have defended hundreds of persons on appeal and have often appeared before this Court.

The revised standard of 25 appeals a year is modest and comports with the nationally recognized standard put in place in the 1980s. Since that time, the burdens placed on appellate defenders have increased. We understand the need to communicate with our clients and that the quality of work done for a person unable to pay for counsel should be no different than for someone who can pay for their lawyer. These current caseload standards prevent attorneys from providing these basic services.

Washington's current standard requires appellate defenders to compromise in ways that impact this Court and what fairness should mean. Frequently, appellate defenders lack the time to file reply briefs or petitions for review, something a person paying for their lawyer would find unacceptable. Indeed, the current caseload prevents appellate defenders from briefing cases as they should, which prevents this Court from examining issues critical to delivering justice in our state.

The current standards also prevent appellate defenders from communicating effectively with their clients. Washington's prisons are remote and challenging to access. The current caseloads prevent most attorneys from visiting their clients, which is an essential obligation to fulfill this Court's rules of professional conduct. While many clients are able to communicate by phone, confidential calls are challenging to arrange. Access is even more challenging and almost impossible if the client's primary language is not English or when they have a mental illness or disorder. Revising the caseloads will improve the ability of appellate defenders to communicate with their clients.

This Court relies on public defenders to move forward the rule of law. Public defenders are responsible for providing this Court with the opportunity to examine the death penalty, excessive youthful sentences, family reunification, the constitutionality of our drug laws, and reckoning with the legal system's racial discrimination. Revising the caseload standards will improve the quality of the cases this Court reviews and, ultimately, the legal system we have all sworn to uphold and protect.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'T. Stearns', with a long horizontal flourish extending to the right.

Travis Stearns  
Attorney at Law

**From:** [OFFICE RECEPTIONIST, CLERK](#)  
**To:** [Farino, Amber](#)  
**Cc:** [Ward, David](#)  
**Subject:** FW: Letter in support of WSBA Indigent Defense Standards  
**Date:** Wednesday, April 30, 2025 9:23:46 AM  
**Attachments:** [Letter in support of WSBA Standards revisions.pdf](#)

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**From:** Travis Stearns <[travisdstearns@gmail.com](mailto:travisdstearns@gmail.com)>  
**Sent:** Wednesday, April 30, 2025 9:21 AM  
**To:** OFFICE RECEPTIONIST, CLERK <[SUPREME@COURTS.WA.GOV](mailto:SUPREME@COURTS.WA.GOV)>  
**Subject:** Letter in support of WSBA Indigent Defense Standards

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Revising the appellate and family defense standards is critical to a fair legal system. Thank you for considering these important revisions.

Sincerely,

Travis Stearns