
Civil Rights & Judiciary Committee

2SSB 5780

Brief Description: Encouraging participation in public defense and prosecution professions.

Sponsors: Senate Committee on Ways & Means (originally sponsored by Senators Torres, Dhingra, Padden, Boehnke, Wilson, L., Braun, Frame, Hasegawa, Kuderer, Lovick, Mullet, Nguyen, Warnick and Wilson, J.).

Brief Summary of Second Substitute Bill

- Requires the Office of Public Defense (OPD) to administer a law student rural defense program and the Criminal Justice Training Commission (CJTC) to administer a law student rural prosecution program.
- Requires the OPD to expand the capacity of the Criminal Defense Training Academy program to train practitioners who are new to public defense, and CJTC to provide trial skills training for practitioners who are new to prosecution.

Hearing Date: 2/20/24

Staff: Matt Sterling (786-7289).

Background:

Caseloads for Indigent Defense.

The Washington Supreme Court adopts standards for indigent defense which require that the caseload of a full-time public defense attorney or assigned counsel should not exceed:

- 150 felonies per attorney per year;
- 300 misdemeanor cases per attorney per year or, in jurisdictions that have not adopted a numerical case weighting system, 400 cases per year;

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- 250 juvenile offender cases per attorney per year;
- 80 open juvenile dependency cases per attorney;
- 250 civil commitment cases per attorney per year;
- 1 active death penalty trial court case at a time plus a limited number of non-death-penalty cases compatible with the time demands of the death penalty case; or
- 36 appeals to an appellate court hearing a case on the record and briefs per attorney per year.

Full-time interns who have not graduated from law school may not have caseloads that exceed 25 percent of the caseload limits established for full-time attorneys. The standards require a public defender to file a signed certification of compliance quarterly in each court where the attorney has been appointed as counsel stating the public defender has the requisite experience and resources needed for the cases which they are assigned and is abiding by caseload standards.

Assignment of Public Defenders.

The cost of public defense counsel appointments is handled by local jurisdictions. Local jurisdictions rely on a variety of service models to provide public defense services, including county defense agencies, in which public defenders are employed by local government, and contract systems in which the local government contracts with a non-profit agency, private law firm, or individual attorneys to perform appointed counsel services. Public defense services handled by locally-appointed attorneys include:

- felony and misdemeanor charges for youth and adults;
- civil commitment cases;
- therapeutic court cases;
- youth cases related to truancy, contempt, and at-risk youth;
- extraditions;
- revocations of special sentencing alternatives; and
- appeals from courts of limited jurisdiction.

Office of Public Defense.

The Office of Public Defense (OPD) is an independent office in the judicial branch of government established to implement the constitutional and statutory guarantees of counsel and ensure the effective and efficient delivery of indigent defense services that are funded by the state. The OPD contracts with attorneys, local governments, and law firms to provide representation for:

- parents in dependency cases;
- persons civilly committed as sexually violent predators;
- persons with criminal appeals and personal restraint petitions originating from superior court;
- persons committed for treatment after a finding of not guilty by reason of insanity; and
- other programs.

Criminal Defense Training Academy. The Criminal Defense Training Academy (Academy) is a five day training program offered by the OPD. The stated purpose of the Academy is to

strengthen public defenders by providing fundamental skills development in an interactive, supportive learning environment that uses a variety of educational methods for students to develop and apply client-centered defense advocacy skills.

Criminal Justice Training Commission.

The Criminal Justice Training Commission (CJTC) is a state entity established in 1974 to establish standards and provide education and training to criminal justice professionals. The responsibilities of the CJTC include establishing and administering standards and processes for the certification, suspension, and decertification of peace officers and corrections officers.

Summary of Bill:

Programs for Public Defenders and Prosecutors.

The OPD must administer a law student rural public defense program that coordinates with one or more law schools to place law students who are eligible to practice as legal interns or recent law school graduates with experienced public defense attorneys located in underserved areas and rural areas of the state. The program must allow interns to gain real-world public defense experience under the mentorship of an experienced public defense attorney, with the purpose of encouraging the intern to consider employment opportunities in public defense in underserved areas and rural areas.

The CJTC must administer a law student rural prosecution program that coordinates with one or more law schools to place law students who are eligible to practice as legal interns or recent law school graduates with experienced prosecutors located in underserved areas and rural areas of the state. The program must allow interns to gain real-world prosecution experience under the mentorship of an experienced prosecutor, including litigation opportunities, with the purpose of encouraging the intern to consider employment opportunities in prosecution in underserved areas and rural areas.

Placements of law students and recent graduates may be in government or non-profit public defense agencies or private firms that contract to provide public defense services. Interns in the program must receive monthly compensation and housing stipends and may include partial reimbursement for the supervising attorney. The OPD must expand the capacity of the Academy program to train practitioners who are new to public defense and the CJTC must provide or contract to provide trial skills training to train practitioners who are new to prosecution. The programs must prioritize training for practitioners in underserved areas and rural areas of the state. By June 30, 2026, the:

- OPD must expand the Academy program offerings to include training for public defense practitioners seeking to achieve advanced qualifications; and
- CJTC must expand a trial skills program to include training for prosecutors seeking to achieve advanced qualifications.

The bill contains provisions to limit implementation to the availability of amounts that are appropriated for the purposes of the bill.

Appropriation: None.

Fiscal Note: Available.

Effective Date: The bill takes effect 90 days after adjournment of the session in which the bill is passed.