



OFFICE OF THE
DISTRICT PUBLIC DEFENDER

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DISTRICT PUBLIC DEFENDER

July 6, 2022

Via email to jpyoung@caddo.org
Hon. John-Paul Young
Caddo Parish Commissioner
District 4
505 Travis Street, Suite 110
Shreveport, LA 71101

RE: Caddo Parish District Public Defender's Office funding

Dear Commissioner Young:

This letter is in response to your request for information from me regarding funding for the Caddo Parish District Public Defender's Office. Our office provides counsel in the First Judicial District Court for Caddo Parish, in Caddo Parish Juvenile Court, and in Shreveport City Court. I would estimate that our office represents seventy-five to eighty-five percent (75% - 85%) of the defendants in criminal court. In fact, the Caddo Parish District Public Defender Office is one of the largest and busiest public defender offices in the entire state.

Our office functions with an annual budget of approximately three point six million dollars (\$3.6M). Compare that to the Caddo Parish District Attorney Office's total budget which is currently more than ten million dollars (\$10M), of which six point four million dollars (\$6.4M) was provided by the Caddo Parish Commission's budget in 2022. Six point two million dollars (\$6.2M) was in statutory charges and there is no such provision for any such allocations to the Public Defender Office. During this same time, the Caddo Parish Commission budgeted zero dollars (\$0) for public defense.

For the criminal justice system to work properly, there must be some leveling of funding between the district attorneys and the public defenders. I am requesting that the leveling start now with the inclusion of my office in funding or in-kind contributions, specifically including office space at no cost or truly little cost.

The public defense system in Louisiana is funded, in large part, by conviction and user fees which are not collected when court is not in session or when persons are unable to pay. We are the only state in the nation that funds public defense in this manner. The conviction and user fees my office received in the past fiscal year has averaged around seventy-two thousand seven hundred seventy-five dollars (\$72,775) per month. This is a decrease in the pre-COVID collections which

were averaging nearly one hundred nine thousand dollars (\$109,000) per month. I believe this decrease is caused by our clients' inability to pay their fines and court costs during this troubling economic time.

Commissioner Young, you asked what funding from the Commission would mean for my office. Any funding would be used to assist us in defending the citizens of Caddo Parish. I would do several things with the additional monies. First, I would hire additional personnel to help reduce caseload to a more manageable range. In this past Legislative Session, the Louisiana Legislature awarded the Caddo Parish District Attorney's Office eight (8) additional warrants for Assistant District Attorneys. In response, my office now needs additional Assistant District Public Defenders. So, I would first hire additional attorneys.

Next, I would increase salaries for my current personnel and for the future hires. Since I took over as District Public Defender on February 20, 2020, I have experienced a huge turnover in attorneys, both full-time and contract. In fact, I have had to replace nearly fifty (50) attorneys in this amount of time. This is, in part, attributed to the busy court schedule in Caddo Parish and, in part, to the low pay in this jurisdiction. Each time I lose an attorney, whether full-time or part-time, there is a delay in moving their cases forward as a new attorney must step in, develop a relationship with the client, and become familiar with the case.

As I am sure you are aware, Caddo Parish has five (5) sections of criminal court operating daily. In nearby jurisdictions, they do not have criminal court every day. Therefore, attorneys come to Caddo to gain experience and then leave for neighboring jurisdictions where they can obtain a contract and only go to court a handful of days in a month, rather than multiple days every week. Salary increases would allow me to hire and retain more personnel and to maintain continuity of representation. This would be a huge benefit for the citizens we represent.

Third, I would use some of the funds to provide additional training opportunities for our Assistant District Public Defenders. At the present time, I ask all attorneys to attend free Continuing Legal Education seminars, whenever possible. I would love to be able to send them to additional trainings. However, this costs money for registration, travel, lodging, meals, etc. Additional training opportunities always improve the representation we provide to our clients.

A Judicial District the size of Caddo warrants true local funding, and I am, hereby, requesting funding from the Caddo Parish Commission. Without adequate funding, the Public Defender Office cannot function well. Without the Public Defender Office, the criminal justice system will collapse. Any assistance the Commission may directly or indirectly provide would be greatly appreciated.

I am available to discuss this matter should you wish to speak with me. My direct line at the office is 318-841-1626 and my cell phone number is 318-347-8532. Thank you for your assistance. I look forward to hearing from you.

Sincerely,


Michelle M. AndrePont