



ORLEANS PUBLIC DEFENDERS

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News

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Justice and fairness threatened as OPD funding remains in jeopardy

The Orleans Public Defenders Office (OPD) is instituting a hiring freeze amid concerns about lack of funding. The office is facing a nearly \$2 million shortfall as it struggles to keep up with a growing criminal justice system.

OPD is particularly concerned about their funding keeping pace with other members of the criminal justice system. “Fairness and balance requires that all members of the criminal justice system are adequately equipped to play their role in assuring public safety,” says Chief District Defender, Derwyn Bunton. “We are committed to our mission of representing poor people, and to do that, we need funding that allows us to manage the workload created by the police, the DA, and the courts. We represent the vast majority of people charged with crime in New Orleans, and we have a duty to the community to do our part to keep our justice system fair and moving,” says Mr. Bunton.

The hiring freeze has been in place informally, but over time could impact the ability of OPD to keep up with caseloads and current trial rates. “If this reality persists for too long, it could mean an increase in caseload and workload for staff, resulting in system slowdowns. Many of our lawyers are at the limit of what the constitution, legal ethics and state standards will allow them to handle,” warned Kendall Green, Chief of Trials for OPD. “Our office has to keep up or the criminal justice system will grind to a halt. This is an impact that will be felt not only within the system, but in all aspects of public safety.” OPD received an historic appropriation of \$750,000 in the Mayor’s proposed budget and is requesting that City Council increase that number so the office can continue to perform at current levels.

“I am particularly concerned because fairness is always threatened when the public defenders cannot keep up,” Mr. Bunton noted. “This past year, our office was instrumental in getting Eugene Thomas, who was innocent, out of prison after an eight year delay. Everyone is presumed innocent and some people are factually innocent and the constitution says that we have to protect them all throughout this process. We cannot go back to the days where fairness and justice depend on what’s in your pocket. New Orleans deserves an adequately funded public defense system.”