

**IN THE SUPREME COURT OF THE STATE OF FLORIDA**

**PUBLIC DEFENDER, ELEVENTH  
JUDICIAL CIRCUIT OF FLORIDA,**

**Petitioner,**

**Case Nos. SC09-1181  
SC10-1349**

**vs.**

**L.T. Case Nos.: 3D08-2272  
3D08-2537  
08-01**

**THE STATE OF FLORIDA,**

**Respondent.**

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**AMICUS BRIEF OF THE AMERICAN BAR ASSOCIATION  
IN SUPPORT OF PETITIONER, PUBLIC DEFENDER,  
ELEVENTH JUDICIAL CIRCUIT OF FLORIDA**

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**On Review from the District Court of Appeal, Third District of Florida**

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## INTRODUCTION AND INTEREST OF AMICUS CURIAE

The American Bar Association (“ABA”), as *amicus curiae*, respectfully submits this brief in each of these consolidated cases in support of Petitioner, the Public Defender of the Eleventh Circuit of Florida (the “Public Defender”). Although the ABA takes no position on any of the factual issues, including but not limited to the Public Defender’s assertion “that underfunding led to the excessive caseloads,”<sup>1</sup> or on the Florida constitutional and statutory issues presented by these consolidated cases, the ABA believes that the Court’s consideration of the issues may be aided by ethical opinions and guidelines previously promulgated by the ABA.

To assist the Court, the ABA offers two documents, each of which is discussed in the Argument below: (A) the ABA Committee on Ethics and Professional Responsibility’s Formal Opinion 06-441, “Ethical Obligations of Lawyers Who Represent Indigent Criminal Defendants When Excessive Caseloads Interfere With Competent and Diligent Representation” (“Formal Opinion 06-441”), a copy of which is attached as Appendix A;<sup>2</sup> and (B) the ABA Standing Committee on Legal Aid and Indigent Defendants’ “Eight Guidelines of Public

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<sup>1</sup> *Florida v. Public Defender, Eleventh Judicial Circuit*, 12 So. 3d 798, 800 (Fla. 3d DCA 2009).

<sup>2</sup> ABA Committee on Ethics and Prof’l Responsibility, Formal Op. 06-441 (May 13, 2006), [http://www.americanbar.org/content/dam/aba/administrative/legal\\_aid\\_indigent\\_defendants/ls\\_sclaid\\_def\\_ethics\\_opinion\\_defender\\_caseloads\\_06\\_441.pdf](http://www.americanbar.org/content/dam/aba/administrative/legal_aid_indigent_defendants/ls_sclaid_def_ethics_opinion_defender_caseloads_06_441.pdf) (last visited Nov. 10, 2011).

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Defense Related to Excessive Workloads” (the “Eight Guidelines”), a copy of which is attached as Appendix B.<sup>3</sup>

The ABA is the largest voluntary professional membership organization and the leading organization of legal professionals in the United States. Its nearly 400,000 members come from all 50 states and other jurisdictions. They include attorneys in private law firms, corporations, nonprofit organizations, government agencies, and prosecutorial and public defender offices, as well as judges, legislators, law professors and law students.<sup>4</sup>

Since its founding, the ABA has actively worked to improve the quality of the legal profession by “[p]romot[ing] competence, ethical conduct and

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<sup>3</sup> The black letter, introduction and commentary of the Eight Guidelines were presented to and adopted as ABA policy by the ABA House of Delegates as Report and Recommendation #119 (Policy adopted Aug. 2009), [http://www.americanbar.org/content/dam/aba/administrative/legal\\_aid\\_indigent\\_defendants/ls\\_sclaid\\_def\\_aba\\_sclaid\\_revised\\_rpt\\_119\\_eight\\_guidelines.pdf](http://www.americanbar.org/content/dam/aba/administrative/legal_aid_indigent_defendants/ls_sclaid_def_aba_sclaid_revised_rpt_119_eight_guidelines.pdf) (last visited Nov. 10, 2011). The ABA’s House of Delegates is composed of over 560 delegates representing states and territories, local and state bar associations, affiliated organizations, ABA sections and divisions, ABA members and the Attorney General of the United States, among others. See ABA General Information, <http://www.abanet.org/leadership/delegates.html> (last visited Nov. 10, 2011).

<sup>4</sup> Neither this brief nor the decision to file it should be interpreted to reflect the views of any judicial member of the American Bar Association. No inference should be drawn that any member of the Judicial Division Council has participated in the adoption or endorsement of the positions in this brief. This brief was not circulated to any member of the Judicial Division Council prior to filing.

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professionalism.”<sup>5</sup> Especially pertinent to the issues of this case is the ABA’s work in the fields of legal ethics and indigent defense. In 1908, the ABA adopted its first CANONS OF PROFESSIONAL ETHICS (now the MODEL RULES OF PROFESSIONAL CONDUCT). In 1920, the ABA created the Standing Committee of Legal Aid and Indigent Defendants (“SCLAID”), and charged SCLAID with the study of the administration of justice as it affects the poor and the promotion of remedial measures to assist the poor in protecting their legal rights. Throughout its existence, the results of SCLAID’s work have been adopted by the ABA House of Delegates as ABA policy.<sup>6</sup>

In addition, the ABA continues to refine its Standards for Criminal Justice.<sup>7</sup> These Standards address the duties imposed on every lawyer in the criminal justice context and are divided into volumes by topical area, of which the Defense

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<sup>5</sup> ABA Mission and Association Goals, [http://www.americanbar.org/utility/about\\_the\\_aba/association\\_goals.html](http://www.americanbar.org/utility/about_the_aba/association_goals.html) (last visited Nov. 10, 2011).

<sup>6</sup> *E.g.*, Report and Recommendation #107 (Policy adopted Aug. 2005) (Resolution 4 states: “Attorneys and defense programs should . . . discontinue indigent defense representation, and/or decline to accept new cases for representation, when, in the exercise of their best professional judgment, workloads are so excessive that representation will interfere with the rendering of quality legal representation or lead to the breach of constitutional or professional obligations”), [http://www.americanbar.org/content/dam/aba/migrated/legalservices/downloads/sc\\_laid/indigentdefense/20110325\\_aba\\_res107.pdf](http://www.americanbar.org/content/dam/aba/migrated/legalservices/downloads/sc_laid/indigentdefense/20110325_aba_res107.pdf) (last visited Nov. 10, 2011).

<sup>7</sup> A history of the development of the ABA Standards for Criminal Justice is available at <http://www.abanet.org/crimjust/standards/home.html>. *See also* Martin Marcus, *The Making of the ABA Criminal Justice Standards: Forty Years of Excellence*, 23 CRIM. JUST. 10, 14-15 (Winter 2009) (describing the careful and balanced process by which the Standards are developed and promulgated).

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Function Standards and the Providing Defense Services Standards are pertinent here.<sup>8</sup> The ABA Standards do not purport to establish a constitutional baseline for effective assistance of counsel. However, as Chief Justice Burger stated in his concurring opinion in *Argersinger v. Hamlin*, “[t]he right to counsel has historically been an evolving concept,” and “[p]art of this evolution has been expressed in the policy prescriptions of the legal profession itself.” 407 U.S. 25, 43-44 (1972) (referring to the ABA project that produced the original ABA Standards for Criminal Justice). More recently, the Supreme Court stated that the Standards provide “guides to determining what [performance of counsel] is reasonable.” *Wiggins v. Smith*, 539 U.S. 510, 524 (2003) (quoting *Strickland v. Washington*, 466 U.S. 668, 688 (1984)).

With its 100-year history of working to improve the quality of legal representation generally, and its 90-year history of working for indigent rights specifically, the ABA submits this brief and its Appendices, as they may be helpful to the Court’s consideration of the issues before it.

ABA policy assumes that public defenders will use public resources efficiently and that defender offices will use their resources to provide adequate representation for indigent defendants. No one can ignore the clear factual disagreement between the trial court and the court of appeal as to how the defender

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<sup>8</sup> Available at <http://www.abanet.org/crimjust/standards> (last visited Nov. 10, 2011).

office at issue allocated public funds. Accurate resolution of the facts will ultimately be essential to a determination whether the defender office is entitled to any relief. The ABA takes no position on which facts are correct.

The ABA supports the position that whether or not caseload burdens will result in ineffective assistance of counsel should be made on a systemic rather than a case-by-case basis – based on accurate facts.

## SUMMARY OF THE ARGUMENT

A standard that requires proof of an actual ethical violation and an injury to the client before awarding a lawyer relief from an excessive caseload would have the effect of requiring the lawyer to breach that lawyer's ethical duties to the client. It would also disregard the 47-year history of indigent criminal defense since *Gideon v. Wainwright*, 372 U.S. 335 (1963), including Formal Opinion 06-441, which concluded that all lawyers, including public defenders, must provide competent and diligent representation. As required by both the Florida Rules and the ABA Model Rules, lawyers with an excessive caseload have an ethical duty not to undertake the representation or, if already underway, to terminate the representation, if the representation will result in violation of the rules of professional conduct.

Further, requiring a showing that a public defense provider's individual attorneys are providing inadequate representation would disregard the provider's ethical obligations. As set out in Formal Opinion 06-441, a supervisor must monitor the workloads of subordinate lawyers to ensure that the workload of each lawyer is appropriate, and must ensure that subordinate lawyers comply with the Rules of Professional Conduct. The Eight Guidelines counsel the public defense provider to take corrective action in advance, "to *avoid* furnishing legal services in violation of professional conduct rules," which action may include filing a motion

requesting that assignments be stopped and that withdrawals be permitted. When public defense providers file such motions, their prayer for relief should be accorded substantial deference because they are in the best position to assess the workloads of their lawyers. Moreover, as officers of the court, their declarations should be given the weight commensurate with the grave penalties for misrepresentation. Finally, deference promotes the independence of the defense function from the judiciary.

The ABA believes that, ultimately, the courts must ensure that public defense providers and their lawyers are able to provide competent and diligent representation in accordance with their professional obligations.

## ARGUMENT

### **I. Requiring Proof Of An Actual Ethical Violation And Injury To The Client Before Awarding Relief From An Excessive Caseload Would Effectively Require A Lawyer To Breach The Lawyer's Ethical Duties To The Client.**

The District Court of Appeal, in each of its opinions below, concluded:

“Only after an assistant public defender proves prejudice or conflict, separate from excessive caseload, may that attorney withdraw from a particular case.” *State v. Public Defender, Eleventh Judicial Circuit*, 12 So. 3d 798, 805 (Fla. 3d DCA 2009); *State v. Bowens*, 39 So. 3d 479, 481 (Fla. 3d DCA 2010) (*quoting, Public Defender*).

The ABA respectfully submits that this conclusion does not consider the ethical obligations of either the individual assistant public defender or of the Public Defender. It also disregards the 48-year history of indigent criminal defense since *Gideon v. Wainwright*,<sup>9</sup> during which organizations including the ABA have studied the effects of excessive caseloads on indigent criminal defense systems and, applying the legal profession's ethical rules, have developed standards and procedures to address those effects.

For example, in 2004, to commemorate *Gideon's* 40<sup>th</sup> anniversary, SCLAID produced a report, *Gideon's Broken Promise: America's Continuing Quest for*

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<sup>9</sup> 372 U.S. 335 (1963).

*Equal Justice* (“*Gideon’s Broken Promise*”).<sup>10</sup> The report concluded that indigent defense lawyers “frequently are burdened by overwhelming caseloads and essentially coerced into furnishing representation in defense systems that fail to provide the bare necessities for an adequate defense (e.g., sufficient time to prepare, experts, investigators, and other paralegals), resulting in routine violations of the Sixth Amendment obligation to provide effective assistance of counsel.”<sup>11</sup> The report further stated that “ethical violations routinely are ignored not only by the lawyers themselves, but also by judges and disciplinary authorities.”<sup>12</sup>

In 2005, armed with this report, SCLAID and the National Legal Aid and Defender Association (“NLADA”) requested that the ABA’s Standing Committee on Ethics and Professional Responsibility (the “ABA Ethics Committee”) prepare an opinion on excessive defender caseloads. In 2006, the ABA Ethics Committee

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<sup>10</sup> [http://www.americanbar.org/groups/legal\\_aid\\_indigent\\_defendants/initiatives/indigent\\_defense\\_systems\\_improvement/gideons\\_broken\\_promise.html](http://www.americanbar.org/groups/legal_aid_indigent_defendants/initiatives/indigent_defense_systems_improvement/gideons_broken_promise.html). The report was based on four public hearings at which 32 witnesses from 22 states presented testimony on the provision of indigent defense services in their respective states. It also drew on the expertise that SCLAID has developed during its years of advocacy for effective indigent civil and criminal legal services. The report focused solely on state indigent defense systems, as opposed to the federal system, which is considerably better funded. More than 20 years earlier, in a similar report, SCLAID, in cooperation with the ABA Sections for Criminal Justice and for General Practice and the National Legal Aid and Defender Association, complained of “public defenders [who] have too many cases and lack support personnel.” *Gideon Undone: The Crisis in Indigent Defense Funding 3* (ABA 1982), [http://www.abanet.org/legalservices/downloads/sclaid/indigent\\_defense/gideonundone.pdf](http://www.abanet.org/legalservices/downloads/sclaid/indigent_defense/gideonundone.pdf).

<sup>11</sup> *Gideon’s Broken Promise*, *supra* note 5, at 38.

<sup>12</sup> *Id.* at 39.

issued Formal Opinion 06-441, a copy of which is attached as Appendix A, in which it concluded that all lawyers, including public defenders, must provide competent and diligent representation as required by the rules of professional conduct, such that indigent defense programs and their lawyers must move to withdraw from cases if they are unable to furnish representation in compliance with their ethical duties and, when clients are being assigned through a court appointment, they should advise the court not to make any new appointments.<sup>13</sup> “The Rules provide no exceptions for lawyers who represent indigent persons charged with crimes.”<sup>14</sup>

While Formal Opinion 06-441 is based on the ABA Model Rules of Professional Conduct as amended by the ABA House of Delegates through August 2003, the Formal Opinion notes that the laws, court rules, regulations, rules of professional conduct and opinions promulgated in the individual jurisdictions are controlling.<sup>15</sup> In the present case, of course, the Rules Regulating the Florida Bar (“Florida Rules”) govern.

Both the Florida Rules and the ABA Model Rules begin with the requirement that a lawyer “provide competent representation to a client.” R. Reg. Fla. Bar 4-1.1; ABA Model Rule 1.1. This requires that the lawyer not only have

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<sup>13</sup> *Id.* at 1.

<sup>14</sup> *Id.* at 3.

<sup>15</sup> *Id.* at 1.

knowledge and skill, but also the time for the “thoroughness and preparation reasonably necessary for the representation.” R. Reg. Fla. Bar. 4-1.1. As the comments to both rules emphasize, an essential element of the competent handling of any matter includes “adequate preparation.” R. Reg. Fla. Bar Comment to Rule 4-1.1; Comment 5 to ABA Model Rule 1.1.

Similarly, the Florida Rules and the ABA Model Rules require a lawyer to act with “reasonable diligence and promptness in representing the client.” R. Reg. Fla. Bar 4-1.3; ABA Model Rule 1.3. As the comments observe, this requires that a lawyer’s “work load be controlled so that each matter can be handled competently.” R. Reg. Fla. Bar Comment to Rule 4-1.3; Comment 2 to ABA Model Rule 1.3. Thus, in taking on a new matter, the lawyer must consider the impact of the new representation on current clients. The lawyer must not take on any representation when there is a significant risk that the new representation “will be materially limited by the lawyer’s responsibilities to another client.” R. Reg. Fla. Bar 4-1.7; ABA Model Rule 1.7(a)(2).

All of these basic rules concerning the lawyer’s ability to represent the client must be considered both at the outset and during the course of the representation. When these duties cannot be fulfilled, the lawyer must not take on the representation (or withdraw from a current representation). As stated by the Florida Rules and the ABA Model Rules, the lawyer “shall not represent a client

or, where representation has commenced, shall withdraw from the representation of a client if: (1) the representation will result in violation of the rules of professional conduct.” R. Reg. Fla. Bar 4-1.16(a)(1); ABA Model Rule 1.16(a)(1).

Where counsel is court-appointed, both the Florida Rules and the ABA Model Rules state that counsel should not seek to avoid court appointments except for good cause, such as when “representing the client is likely to result in a violation of the Rules of Professional Conduct.” R. Reg. Fla. Bar 4-6.2; ABA Model Rule 6.2.

In sum, both the Florida Rules and the ABA Model Rules require the lawyer to ensure that the client can be represented diligently and competently. If those duties cannot be fulfilled, the lawyer has an ethical duty not to undertake the representation (or if already underway, the representation must be terminated).<sup>16</sup> To require proof of an actual ethical violation and an injury to the client before awarding relief would, in effect, force a lawyer to breach his or her ethical duties to the client.

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<sup>16</sup> See also Defense Function Standard 4-1.3(e) (requiring that defense counsel “not carry a workload that, by reason of its excessive size, interferes with the rendering of quality representation, endangers the client’s interest in the speedy disposition of charges, or may lead to the breach of professional obligations.”).

## **II. Requiring A Showing That Individual Attorneys Are Providing Inadequate Representation Would Disregard The Public Defense Provider's Ethical Obligations.**

The Third District Court of Appeal, in its *Public Defender* opinion below, stated: "PD 11 presented evidence of excessive caseload and no more . . . . [T]here was no showing that individual attorneys were providing inadequate representation, nor do we believe this could have been proven in the aggregate, simply based on caseload averages and anecdotal testimony." *State v. Public Defender, Eleventh Circuit*, 12 So. 3d 798, 802-03 (Fla. 3d DCA 2009) (footnotes omitted).

The ABA respectfully submits that requiring a showing that individual attorneys are providing inadequate representation disregards the ethical obligations of the Public Defender. First, Formal Opinion 06-441 notes that the public defender's office should be considered as a law firm assigned to represent the client, such that responsibility for handling cases falls upon the office as a whole.<sup>17</sup> The Formal Opinion states, "If a supervisor [including the head of a public defender's office and those within such an office having intermediate managerial responsibilities] knows that a subordinate's workload renders the lawyer unable to provide competent and diligent representation and the supervisor fails to take

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<sup>17</sup> *Id.* at 5 n. 17, citing Model Rule 1.0(c).

reasonable remedial action, the supervisor is responsible for the subordinate's violation of the Rules of Professional Conduct."<sup>18</sup>

Formal Opinion 06-441 also states that the supervisor must monitor the workloads of subordinate lawyers to ensure that the workload of each lawyer is appropriate. This includes "consideration of the type and complexity of cases being handled by each lawyer; the experience and ability of each lawyer; the resources available to support her, and any non-representational responsibilities assigned to the subordinate lawyers."<sup>19</sup> The supervisor should take whatever additional steps are necessary to ensure that a subordinate lawyer is able to meet her ethical obligations, which may require "transferring case(s) to another lawyer or other lawyers."<sup>20</sup> Because the supervisor is required to remain aware of the workload of each subordinate lawyer, the ABA believes that a public defense provider has the information necessary to establish the existence of an excessive caseload without demonstrating that individual lawyers are providing inadequate representation.

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<sup>18</sup> *Id.* at 9; *see also* Providing Defense Services Standards, Standard 5-5.3(a) (prohibiting a public defender organization from accepting "workloads that, by reason of their excessive size, interfere with the rendering of quality representation or lead to the breach of professional obligations").

<sup>19</sup> *Id.* at 7. *See also* ABA Defense Services Standards, Comment to Standard 5-5.3 at 71 ("Only the lawyers themselves know how much must be done to represent their clients and how much time the preparation is likely to take.").

<sup>20</sup> *Id.* at 7.

Further, the Eight Guidelines, a copy of which is attached at Appendix B, provide an “action plan” that public defense providers – defined as public defender agencies and other programs that furnish assigned lawyers and contract lawyers – should follow when faced with excessive caseloads in order to comply with their professional responsibilities.<sup>21</sup> The Eight Guidelines build on, *inter alia*, Formal Opinion 06-441 and the ABA Criminal Justice Standards.<sup>22</sup>

The Eight Guidelines note that a concurrent conflict of interest is created when there are an excessive number of cases, forcing a lawyer to choose among the interests of clients and depriving some if not all of them of competent and diligent defense services.<sup>23</sup> The Eight Guidelines counsel the public defense provider to take corrective action in advance, “to *avoid* furnishing legal services in

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<sup>21</sup> *Supra* note 3. The black letter, introduction and commentary of the Eight Guidelines were adopted as ABA policy in August 2009. Guideline 1 urges public defense providers to assess whether excessive workloads are preventing their lawyers from fulfilling performance obligations. Guidelines 2, 3 and 4 relate to the need for continuous supervision and monitoring of workloads, training of lawyers respecting their ethical duty when confronted with excessive workloads, and the need for public defense providers to determine if excessive workloads exist. Guidelines 6 through 8 address the range of options that public defense providers and their lawyers should consider when excessive workloads are present. As set out in Guideline 6, the circumstances may warrant that public defense providers or the individual lawyers seek redress in the courts, but Guideline 5 suggests that the public defense provider consider other choices before this step is required.

<sup>22</sup> *Id.*

<sup>23</sup> *Id.* at 5, citing *In re Order on Prosecution of Criminal Appeals by the Tenth Judicial Circuit Public Defender*, 561 So. 2d 1130, 1135 (Fla. 1990); *see also* ABA Model Rule 1.7(a)(2); Formal Opinion 06-441 (supervisors and managers of public defense organization must monitor workload of their supervised lawyers to ensure that workloads do not exceed a level that may be competently handled).

violation of professional conduct rules,” which may include filing a motion requesting that assignments be stopped and that withdrawals be permitted.<sup>24</sup> As stated in the Comment to Guideline 6, “Normally, public defense providers, rather than individual lawyers, will take the initiative and move to suspend new case assignments” and, where the public defense provider has followed the Guidelines, “it should be in an especially strong position to show that its workload is excessive, and its representations regarding workloads should be accepted by the court.” As also stated in the Comment to Guideline 6, the public defense provider should support the motion through “statistical data, anecdotal information, as well as other kinds of evidence.” As stated in the Comment to Guideline 7, “When Providers file motions requesting that assignments be stopped and that withdrawals be permitted, their prayer for relief should be accorded substantial deference because Providers are in the best position to assess the workloads of their lawyers.”

Moreover, the providers are officers of the court. When they “address the judge solemnly upon a matter before the court, their declarations are virtually made under oath” and their representations “should be given the weight commensurate with the grave penalties risked for misrepresentation.” Comment to Guideline 7 (*citing Holloway v. Arkansas*, 435 U.S. 475, 486, 486 n. 9 (1978)). Further,

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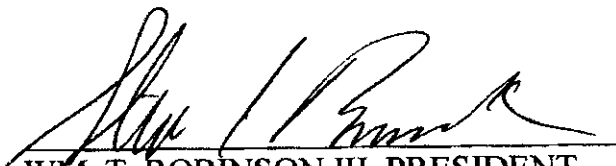
<sup>24</sup> Comment to Guideline 6 (emphasis supplied); *compare* Formal Opinion 06-441 at 5 (lawyer’s primary duty is to existing clients; thus, a lawyer “must decline to accept new cases, rather than withdraw from existing cases” if existing workload becomes excessive).

deference to the public defense provider promotes the independence of the defense function. *See* Comment to Guideline 2 (“the ABA endorses complete independence of the defense function, in which the judiciary is neither involved in the selection of counsel nor in their supervision”).

The ABA believes that, ultimately, the courts must ensure that public defense providers and their lawyers are able to provide competent and diligent representation in accordance with their professional obligations. *See, e.g.*, ABA Providing Defense Services Standards, Standard 5-5.3(b) (“Courts should not require individuals or programs to accept caseloads that will lead to the furnishing of representation lacking in quality or to the breach of professional obligations”); Comment to Guideline 7 (judiciary should ensure that providers and their lawyers are not forced to accept unreasonable numbers of cases). The ABA therefore offers Formal Opinion 06-441 and the Eight Guidelines to assist the Court as it considers whether the Public Defender must make a showing that individual attorneys are providing inadequate representation in order to establish that excessive caseloads prevent the Public Defender from carrying out its legal and ethical obligations to indigent defendants.

**CONCLUSION**

For the foregoing reasons, and taking no position on any of the factual or the Florida constitutional and statutory issues presented by these consolidated cases, *amicus curiae* American Bar Association requests that the Florida Supreme Court take ABA policy on excessive caseloads into consideration as it reaches its decision in this case.



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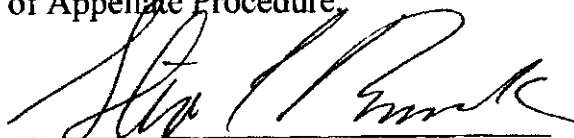
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**CERTIFICATE OF COMPLIANCE**

I HEREBY CERTIFY that this brief complies with the font requirements of Rule 9.210(a)(2) of the Florida Rules of Appellate Procedure.




STEVEN L. BRANNOCK  
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## CERTIFICATE OF SERVICE

I HEREBY CERTIFY that a true and correct copy of the foregoing has been furnished by U.S. Mail to Parker D. Thomson, Alvin F. Lindsay, Julie E. Nevins and Matthew R. Bray, Hogan Lovells US, LLP, 1111 Brickell Ave., Suite 1900, Miami, Florida 33131; Scott D. Makar and Louis F. Hubener, Office of the Attorney General, The Capitol, PL-01, Tallahassee, Florida 32399-1050; Richard L. Polin, Office of the Attorney General, 444 Brickell Ave., Suite 650, Miami, Florida 33131; Chief Judge Joseph P. Farina, Miami-Dade County Courthouse, 73 West Flagler Street, Miami, Florida 33130; Administrative Judge Stanford Blake, Richard E. Gerstein Justice Building, 1351 N.W. 12<sup>th</sup> Street, Miami, Florida 33125; Linda Kelly Kearson, General Counsel, Eleventh Judicial Circuit of Florida, Lawson E. Thomas Courthouse Center, 175 N.W. First Ave., 30<sup>th</sup> Floor, Miami, Florida 33128; Joseph P. George, Jr. and Philip Reizenstein, Regional Civil and Criminal Conflict Counsel, 1501 N.W. N. River Drive, Miami, Florida 33125; Stephen Presnell, General Counsel, Justice Administration Commission, P.O. Box 1654, Tallahassee, Florida 32302; Carlos Martinez, Public Defender, 1320 N.W. 14<sup>th</sup> Street, Miami, Florida 33125; Arthur Jacobs, Florida Prosecuting Attorneys Association, 961687 Gateway Blvd., Suite 201-I, Fernandina Beach, Florida 32034; and Penny Brill and Don Horn, Office of the State Attorney, E.R. Graham

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January 2012.

  
\_\_\_\_\_  
STEVEN L. BRANNOCK  
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# AMERICAN BAR ASSOCIATION

STANDING COMMITTEE ON ETHICS AND PROFESSIONAL RESPONSIBILITY

Formal Opinion 06-441

May 13, 2006

## Ethical Obligations of Lawyers Who Represent Indigent Criminal Defendants When Excessive Caseloads Interfere With Competent and Diligent Representation

*All lawyers, including public defenders and other lawyers who, under court appointment or government contract, represent indigent persons charged with criminal offenses, must provide competent and diligent representation. If workload prevents a lawyer from providing competent and diligent representation to existing clients, she must not accept new clients. If the clients are being assigned through a court appointment system, the lawyer should request that the court not make any new appointments. Once the lawyer is representing a client, the lawyer must move to withdraw from representation if she cannot provide competent and diligent representation. If the court denies the lawyer's motion to withdraw, and any available means of appealing such ruling is unsuccessful, the lawyer must continue with the representation while taking whatever steps are feasible to ensure that she will be able to competently and diligently represent the defendant.*

*Lawyer supervisors, including heads of public defenders' offices and those within such offices having intermediate managerial responsibilities, must make reasonable efforts to ensure that the other lawyers in the office conform to the Rules of Professional Conduct. To that end, lawyer supervisors must, working closely with the lawyers they supervise, monitor the workload of the supervised lawyers to ensure that the workloads do not exceed a level that may be competently handled by the individual lawyers.*

In this opinion,<sup>1</sup> we consider the ethical responsibilities of lawyers, whether employed in the capacity of public defenders or otherwise, who represent indigent persons charged with criminal offenses, when the lawyers' workloads prevent them from providing competent and diligent representa-

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1. This opinion is based on the Model Rules of Professional Conduct as amended by the ABA House of Delegates through August 2003. The laws, court rules, regulations, rules of professional conduct and opinions promulgated in the individual jurisdictions are controlling.

tion to all their clients. Excessive workloads present issues for both those who represent indigent defendants and the lawyers who supervise them.<sup>2</sup>

**Ethical responsibilities of a public defender<sup>3</sup> in regard to individual workload**

Persons charged with crimes have a constitutional right to the effective assistance of counsel.<sup>4</sup> Generally, if a person charged with a crime is unable to afford a lawyer, he is constitutionally entitled to have a lawyer appointed to represent him.<sup>5</sup> The states have attempted to satisfy this constitutional mandate through various methods, such as establishment of public defender, court appointment, and contract systems.<sup>6</sup> Because these systems have been created to provide representation for a virtually unlimited number of indigent criminal defendants, the lawyers employed to provide representation generally are limited in their ability to control the number of clients they are assigned. Measures have been adopted in some jurisdictions in attempts to control workloads,<sup>7</sup> including the establishment of procedures for assigning cases to lawyers outside public defenders' offices when the cases could not properly be directed to a public defender, either because of a conflict of interest or for other reasons.

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2. For additional discussion of the problems presented by excessive caseloads for public defenders, see "Gideon's Broken Promise: American's Continuing Quest For Equal Justice," prepared by the American Bar Association's Standing Committee on Legal Aid and Indigent Defendants 29 (ABA 2004), available at <http://www.abanet.org/legalservices/sclaid/defender/brokenpromise/fullreport.pdf> (last visited June 21, 2006).

3. The term "public defender" as used here means both a lawyer employed in a public defender's office and any other lawyer who represents, pursuant to court appointment or government contract, indigent persons charged with criminal offenses.

4. U.S. CONST. amends. VI & XIV.

5. The United States Supreme Court has interpreted the Sixth Amendment to require the appointment of counsel in any state and federal criminal prosecution that, regardless of whether for a misdemeanor or felony, leads or may lead to imprisonment for any period of time. See generally, *Alabama v. Shelton*, 535 U.S. 654, 662 (2002); *Strickland v. Washington*, 466 U.S. 668, 684-86 (1984); *Scott v. Illinois*, 440 U.S. 367, 373-74 (1979); *Argersinger v. Hamlin*, 407 U.S. 25, 30-31 (1972); *Gideon v. Wainwright*, 372 U.S. 335, 342-45 (1963); *Johnson v. Zerbst*, 304 U.S. 458, 462-63 (1938).

6. Most states deliver indigent defense services using a public defender's office (eighteen states) or a combination of public defender, assigned counsel, and contract defender (another twenty-nine states), according to the Spangenberg Group, which developed a report on behalf of the ABA Standing Committee on Legal Aid and Indigent Defendants. See The Spangenberg Group, "Statewide Indigent Defense Systems: 2005," available at <http://www.abanet.org/legalservices/downloads/sclaid/indigentdefense/statewideindefsystems2005.pdf> (last visited June 21, 2006).

7. See generally, National Symposium on Indigent Defense 2000, *Redefining Leadership for Equal Justice, A Conference Report* (U.S. Dep't of Justice, Bureau of Justice Assistance, Wash. D.C.) 3 (June 29-30, 2000), available at <http://www.ojp.usdoj.gov/indigentdefense/symposium.pdf> (last visited June 21, 2006) (common problem in indigent defense delivery systems is that "lawyers often have unmanageable caseloads (700 or more in a year)").

Model Rules of Professional Conduct 1.1, 1.2(a), 1.3, and 1.4 require lawyers to provide competent representation, abide by certain client decisions, exercise diligence, and communicate with the client concerning the subject of representation.<sup>8</sup> These obligations include, but are not limited to, the responsibilities to keep abreast of changes in the law; adequately investigate, analyze, and prepare cases; act promptly on behalf of clients; communicate effectively on behalf of and with clients; control workload so each matter can be handled competently; and, if a lawyer is not experienced with or knowledgeable about a specific area of the law, either associate with counsel who is knowledgeable in the area or educate herself about the area. The Rules provide no exception for lawyers who represent indigent persons charged with crimes.<sup>9</sup>

8. Rule 1.1(a) provides that “[a] lawyer shall provide competent representation to a client. Competent representation requires the legal knowledge, skill, thoroughness and preparation reasonably necessary for the representation.”

Rule 1.2(a) states:

[A] lawyer shall abide by a client’s decisions concerning the objectives of representation and, as required by Rule 1.4, shall consult with the client as to the means by which they are to be pursued. A lawyer may take such action on behalf of the client as is impliedly authorized to carry out the representation. A lawyer shall abide by a client’s decision whether to settle a matter. In a criminal case, the lawyer shall abide by the client’s decision, after consultation with the lawyer, as to a plea to be entered, whether to waive jury trial and whether the client will testify.

Rule 1.3 states that “[a] lawyer shall act with reasonable diligence and promptness in representing a client.”

Rule 1.4(a) and (b) states:

(a) A lawyer shall:

(1) promptly inform the client of any decision or circumstance with respect to which the client’s informed consent, as defined in Rule 1.0(e), is required by these Rules;

(2) reasonably consult with the client about the means by which the client’s objectives are to be accomplished;

(3) keep the client reasonably informed about the status of the matter;

(4) promptly comply with reasonable requests for information; and

(5) consult with the client about any relevant limitation on the lawyer’s conduct when the lawyer knows that the client expects assistance not permitted by the Rules of Professional Conduct or other law.

(b) A lawyer shall explain a matter to the extent reasonably necessary to permit the client to make informed decisions regarding the representation.

9. See ABA Formal Opinion Op. 347 (Dec. 1, 1981) (Ethical Obligations of Lawyers to Clients of Legal Services Offices When Those Offices Lose Funding), in FORMAL AND INFORMAL ETHICS OPINIONS, FORMAL OPINIONS 316-348, INFORMAL OPINIONS 1285-1495 at 139 (ABA 1985) (duties owed to existing clients include duty of adequate preparation and a duty of competent representation); ABA Informal Op. 1359 (June 4, 1976) (Use of Waiting Lists or Priorities by Legal Service Officer), *id.* at 237 (same); ABA Informal Op. 1428 (Sept. 12, 1979) (Lawyer-Client Relationship Between the Individual and Legal Services Office: Duty of Office Toward Client When Attorney Representing Him (Her) Leaves the Office and Withdraws from the Case), *id.* at 326 (all lawyers, including legal services lawyers, are subject to mandatory duties owed by lawyers to existing clients, including duty of adequate preparation

Comment 2 to Rule 1.3 states that a lawyer's workload "must be controlled so that each matter may be handled competently."<sup>10</sup> The Rules do not prescribe a formula to be used in determining whether a particular workload is excessive. National standards as to numerical caseload limits have been cited by the American Bar Association.<sup>11</sup> Although such standards may be considered, they are not the sole factor in determining if a workload is excessive. Such a determination depends not only on the number of cases, but also on such factors as case complexity, the availability of support services, the lawyer's experience and ability, and the lawyer's nonrepresentational duties.<sup>12</sup> If a lawyer believes that her workload is such that she is unable to meet the basic ethical obligations required of her in the representation of a client, she must not continue the representation of that client or, if representation has not yet begun, she must decline the representation.<sup>13</sup>

A lawyer's primary ethical duty is owed to existing clients.<sup>14</sup> Therefore, a

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and competent representation). *See also* South Carolina Bar Ethics Adv. Op. 04-12 (Nov. 12, 2004) (all lawyers, including public defenders, have ethical obligation not to undertake caseload that leads to violation of professional conduct rules).

The applicability of Rules 1.1, 1.3, and 1.4 to public defenders and/or prosecutors has been recognized by ethics advisory committees in at least one other state. *See* Va. Legal Eth. Op. 1798 (Aug. 3, 2004) (duties of competence and diligence contained within rules of professional conduct apply equally to all lawyers, including prosecutors).

10. Principle 5 of *The Ten Principles of a Public Defense Delivery System* specifically addresses the workload of criminal defense lawyers:

*Defense counsel's workload is controlled to permit the rendering of quality representation.* Counsel's workload, including appointed and other work, should never be so large as to interfere with the rendering of quality representation or lead to the breach of ethical obligations, and counsel is obligated to decline appointments above such levels. National caseload standards should in no event be exceeded, but the concept of workload (i.e., caseload adjusted by factors such as case complexity, support services, and an attorney's nonrepresentational duties) is a more accurate measurement.

Report to the ABA House of Delegates No. 107 (adopted Feb. 5, 2002), *available at* <http://www.abanet.org/legalservices/downloads/sclaid/10principles.pdf> (last visited June 21, 2006) (emphasis in original).

11. *Id.*

12. *Id.* *See also* Attorney Grievance Comm'n of Maryland v. Ficker, 706 A.2d 1045, 1051-52 (1998) (supervising lawyer violated Rule 5.1 by assigning too many cases to supervised lawyer, assigning cases day before trial, and assigning cases too complex for supervised lawyer's level of experience and ability).

13. Rule 1.16(a) states that "a lawyer shall not represent a client or, where representation has begun, shall withdraw from the representation of a client if the representation will result in violation of the Model Rules of Professional Conduct or other law."

14. *See* ABA Formal Opinion Op. 96-399 (Jan. 18, 1996) (Ethical Obligations of Lawyers Whose Employers Receive Funds from the Legal Services Corporation to their Existing and Future Clients When Such Funding is Reduced and When Remaining Funding is Subject to Restrictive Conditions), in *FORMAL AND INFORMAL ETHICS OPINIONS 1983-1998* at 369 (ABA 2000); ABA Formal Opinion Op. 347, *supra* note 9.

lawyer must decline to accept new cases, rather than withdraw from existing cases, if the acceptance of a new case will result in her workload becoming excessive. When an existing workload does become excessive, the lawyer must reduce it to the extent that what remains to be done can be handled in full compliance with the Rules.

When a lawyer receives appointments directly from the court rather than as a member of a public defender's office or law firm that receives the appointment, she should take appropriate action if she believes that her workload will become, or already is, excessive. Such action may include the following:

- requesting that the court refrain from assigning the lawyer any new cases until such time as the lawyer's existing caseload has been reduced to a level that she is able to accept new cases and provide competent legal representation; and
- if the excessive workload cannot be resolved simply through the court's not assigning new cases, the lawyer should file a motion with the trial court requesting permission to withdraw from a sufficient number of cases to allow the provision of competent and diligent representation to the remaining clients.<sup>15</sup>

If the lawyer has sought court permission to withdraw from the representation and that permission has been denied, the lawyer must take all feasible steps to assure that the client receives competent representation.

When a lawyer receives appointments as a member of a public defender's office or law firm, the appropriate action to be taken by the lawyer to reduce an excessive workload might include, with approval of the lawyer's supervisor:

- transferring non-representational responsibilities within the office, including managerial responsibilities, to others;
- refusing new cases;<sup>16</sup> and
- transferring current case(s) to another lawyer whose workload will allow for the transfer of the case(s).<sup>17</sup>

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15. Whenever a lawyer seeks to withdraw from a representation the client should be notified, even if court rules do not require such notification. See Rule 1.4.

16. It should be noted that a public defender's attempt to avoid appointment or to withdraw from a case must be based on valid legal grounds. Rule 6.2(a) provides, in pertinent part, that "[a] lawyer shall not seek to avoid appointment by a tribunal to represent a person *except for good cause*, such as representing the client is likely to result in violation of the Rules of Professional Conduct or other law." (Emphasis added). Therefore, a public defender should not claim an excessive workload in an attempt to avoid new cases or to withdraw from current cases unless good cause objectively exists.

17. It is important to note that, for purposes of the Model Rules, a public defender's office, much like a legal services office, is considered to be the equivalent of a law firm. See Rule 1.0(c). Unless a court specifically names an individual lawyer within a public defender's office to represent an indigent defendant, the public defender's office should be considered as a firm assigned to represent the client; responsibility for handling the case falls upon the office as a whole. See ABA Informal Op. 1428, *supra* note 9 (legal services agency should be considered firm retained by client; responsibility for handling caseload of departing legal services lawyer falls upon office as whole rather than upon lawyer who is departing). Therefore, cases may ethically be reassigned within a public defender's office.

If the supervisor fails to provide appropriate assistance or relief, the lawyer should continue to advance up the chain of command within the office until either relief is obtained or the lawyer has reached and requested assistance or relief from the head of the public defender's office.

In presenting these options, the Committee recognizes that whether a public defender's workload is excessive often is a difficult judgment requiring evaluation of factors such as the complexity of the lawyer's cases and other factors.<sup>18</sup> When a public defender consults her supervisor and the supervisor makes a conscientious effort to deal with workload issues, the supervisor's resolution ordinarily will constitute a "reasonable resolution of an arguable question of professional duty" as discussed in Rule 5.2(b).<sup>19</sup> In those cases where the supervisor's resolution is not reasonable, however, the public defender must take further action.<sup>20</sup>

Such further action might include:

- if relief is not obtained from the head of the public defender's office, appealing to the governing board, if any, of the public defender's office;<sup>21</sup> and
- if the lawyer is still not able to obtain relief,<sup>22</sup> filing a motion with the trial court requesting permission to withdraw from a sufficient number of cases to allow the provision of competent and diligent representation to the remaining clients.<sup>23</sup>

If the public defender is not allowed to withdraw from representation, she must obey the court's order while taking all steps reasonably feasible to insure that her client receives competent and diligent representation.<sup>24</sup>

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18. See note 12, *supra*, and accompanying text.

19. See Comment [2].

20. See, e.g., *Atty. Grievance Comm'n of Maryland v. Kahn*, 431 A.2d 1336, 1352 (1981) ("Obviously, the high ethical standards and professional obligations of an attorney may never be breached because an attorney's employer may direct such a course of action on pain of dismissal. . . .")

21. See *Michigan Bar Committee on Prof. & Jud. Eth. Op. RI-252* (Mar. 1, 1996) (in context of civil legal services agency, if subordinate lawyer receives no relief from excessive workload from lawyer supervisor, she should, under Rule 1.13(b) and (c), take the matter to legal services board for resolution).

22. Rule 5.2 makes clear that subordinate lawyers are not insulated from violating the Rules of Professional Conduct and suffering the consequences merely because they acted in accordance with a supervisory lawyer's advice or direction unless it was in regard to "an arguable question of professional duty."

23. A public defender filing a motion to withdraw under these circumstances should provide the court with information necessary to justify the withdrawal, while being mindful of the obligations not to disclose confidential information or information as to strategy or other matters that may prejudice the client. See Rule 1.16 cmt. 3.

24. Notwithstanding the lawyer's duty in this circumstance to continue in the representation and to make every attempt to render the client competent representation, the lawyer nevertheless may pursue any available means of review of the court's order. See *Iowa Supreme Court Bd. of Prof. Ethics & Conduct v. Hughes*, 557 N.W.2d 890, 894

**Ethical responsibility of a lawyer who supervises a public defender**

Rule 5.1 provides that lawyers who have managerial authority, including those with intermediate managerial responsibilities, over the professional work of a firm or public sector legal agency or department shall make reasonable efforts to ensure that the other lawyers in the agency or department conform to the Rules of Professional Conduct. Rule 5.1 requires that lawyers having direct supervisory authority take reasonable steps to ensure that lawyers in the office they supervise are acting diligently in regard to all legal matters entrusted to them, communicating appropriately with the clients on whose cases they are working, and providing competent representation to their clients. As an essential first step, the supervisor must monitor the workloads of subordinate lawyers to ensure that the workload of each lawyer is appropriate. This involves consideration of the type and complexity of cases being handled by each lawyer; the experience and ability of each lawyer; the resources available to support her, and any non-representational responsibilities assigned to the subordinate lawyers.

If any subordinate lawyer's workload is found to be excessive, the supervisor should take whatever additional steps are necessary to ensure that the subordinate lawyer is able to meet her ethical obligations in regard to the representation of her clients. These might include the following:

- transferring the lawyer's non-representational responsibilities, including managerial responsibilities, to others in the office;
- transferring case(s) to another lawyer or other lawyers whose workload will allow them to provide competent representation;<sup>25</sup>
- if there are no other lawyers within the office who can take over the cases from which the individual lawyer needs to withdraw, supporting the lawyer's efforts to withdraw from the representation of the client;<sup>26</sup> and finally,
- if the court will not allow the lawyer to withdraw from representation, providing the lawyer with whatever additional resources can be made available to assist her in continuing to represent the client(s) in a manner consistent with the Rules of Professional Conduct.

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(Iowa 1996) ("ignoring a court order is simply not an appropriate step to test the validity of the order under our Code of Professional Responsibility"); Utah Bar Eth. Adv. Op. 107 (Feb. 15, 1992) (if grounds exist to decline court appointment, lawyer should not disobey order but should seek review by appeal or other available procedure).

25. See note 17, *supra*.

26. See *In re Order on Prosecution of Criminal Appeals by Tenth Judicial Circuit Public Defender*, 561 So.2d 1130, 1138-39 (Fla. 1990) (in context of inadequate funding, court stated that if "the backlog of cases in the public defender's office is so excessive that there is no possible way he can timely handle those cases, it is his responsibility to move the court to withdraw"); see also *In re Order on Motions to Withdraw Filed by Tenth Circuit Public Defender*, 612 So.2d 597 (Fla. App. 1992) (en banc) (public defender's office entitled to withdraw due to excessive caseload from representing defendants in one hundred forty-three cases).

When a supervised lawyer's workload is excessive and, notwithstanding any other efforts made by her supervisor to address the problem, it is obviously incumbent upon the supervisor to assign no additional cases to the lawyer, and, if the lawyer's cases come by assignment from the court, to support the lawyer's efforts to have no new cases assigned to her by the court until such time as she can adequately fulfill her ethical responsibilities to her existing clients.

In dealing with workload issues, supervisors frequently must balance competing demands for scarce resources. As Comment [2] to Rule 5.2 observes, if the question of whether a lawyer's workload is too great is "reasonably arguable," the supervisor of the lawyer has the authority to decide the question. In the final analysis, however, each client is entitled to competent and diligent representation. If a supervisor knows that a subordinate's workload renders the lawyer unable to provide competent and diligent representation and the supervisor fails to take reasonable remedial action, under Rule 5.1(c),<sup>27</sup> the supervisor himself is responsible for the subordinate's violation of the Rules of Professional Conduct.<sup>28</sup>

27. Rule 5.1(c) states:

(c) A lawyer shall be responsible for another lawyer's violation of the Rules of Professional Conduct if: (1) the lawyer orders or, with knowledge of the specific conduct, ratifies the conduct involved; or (2) the lawyer is a partner or has comparable managerial authority in the law firm in which the other lawyer practices, or has direct supervisory authority over the other lawyer, and knows of the conduct at a time when its consequences can be avoided or mitigated but fails to take reasonable remedial action.

See also Rules 1.16 (a) and 8.4 (a).

28. See, e.g., Attorney Grievance Comm'n of Maryland v. Ficker, 706 A.2d at 1052, *supra* note 12); Va. Legal Ethics Op. 1798 *supra* note 9 (lawyer supervisor who assigns caseload that is so large as to prevent lawyer from ethically representing clients would violate Rule 5.1); American Council of Chief Defenders, Nat'l Legal Aid and Defender Ass'n Eth. Op. 03-01 (April 2003), available at <http://www.nlada.org/DMS/Documents/1082573112.32/ACCD%20Ethics%20opinion%20on%20Workloads.pdf> (last visited June 21, 2006) ("chief executive of an agency providing public defense services is ethically prohibited from accepting a number of cases which exceeds the capacity of the agency's attorneys to provide competent, quality representation in every case.... When confronted with a prospective overloading of cases or reductions in funding or staffing which will cause the agency's attorneys to exceed such capacity, the chief executive of a public defense agency is ethically required to refuse appointment to any and all such excess cases."); Wisconsin State Bar Prof. Ethics Comm. Op. E-91-3 (1991) (assigning caseload that exceeds recognized maximum caseload standards, and that would not allow subordinate public defender to conform to rules of professional conduct, "could result in a violation of disciplinary standards"); Ariz. Op. No. 90-10 (Sept. 17, 1990) ("when a Public Defender has knowledge that subordinate lawyers, because of their caseloads, cannot comply with their duties of diligence and competence, the Public Defender must take action."); Wisconsin State Bar Prof. Ethics Comm. Op. E-84-11 (1984) (supervisors in public defender's office may not ethically increase workloads of subordinate lawyers to point where subordinate lawyer cannot, even at personal sacrifice, handle each of her clients' matters competently and in non-neglectful manner).

**Conclusion**

The obligations of competence, diligence, and communication under the Rules apply equally to every lawyer. All lawyers, including public defenders, have an ethical obligation to control their workloads so that every matter they undertake will be handled competently and diligently. If a lawyer's workload is such that the lawyer is unable to provide competent and diligent representation to existing or potential clients, the lawyer should not accept new clients. If the problem of an excessive workload cannot be resolved through the non-acceptance of new clients or by other available measures, the lawyer should move to withdraw as counsel in existing cases to the extent necessary to bring the workload down to a manageable level, while at all times attempting to limit the prejudice to any client from whose case the lawyer has withdrawn. If permission of a court is required to withdraw from representation and permission is refused, the lawyer's obligations under the Rules remain: the lawyer must continue with the representation while taking whatever steps are feasible to ensure that she will be able to provide competent and diligent representation to the defendant.

Supervisors, including the head of a public defender's office and those within such an office having intermediate managerial responsibilities, must make reasonable efforts to ensure that the other lawyers in the office conform to the Rules of Professional Conduct. To that end, supervisors must, working with the lawyers they supervise, monitor the workload of the subordinate lawyers to ensure that the workloads are not allowed to exceed that which may be handled by the individual lawyers. If a supervisor knows that a subordinate's workload renders the lawyer unable to provide competent and diligent representation and the supervisor fails to take reasonable remedial action, the supervisor is responsible for the subordinate's violation of the Rules of Professional Conduct.

**AMERICAN BAR ASSOCIATION**  
**STANDING COMMITTEE ON LEGAL AID AND INDIGENT**  
**DEFENDANTS**  
**CRIMINAL JUSTICE SECTION**  
**SPECIAL COMMITTEE ON DEATH PENALTY**  
**REPRESENTATION**  
**COUNCIL ON RACIAL AND ETHNIC JUSTICE**  
**STANDING COMMITTEE ON JUDICIAL INDEPENDENCE**  
**GENERAL PRACTICE, SOLO, AND SMALL FIRM**  
**DIVISION**  
**SECTION OF LITIGATION**  
**SECTION OF INDIVIDUAL RIGHTS AND**  
**RESPONSIBILITIES**  
**GOVERNMENT AND PUBLIC SECTOR LAWYERS**  
**DIVISION**  
**AMERICAN JUDICATURE SOCIETY**

**REPORT TO THE HOUSE OF DELEGATES**

**RECOMMENDATION**

- 1 **RESOLVED**, That the American Bar Association adopts the black letter (and
- 2 introduction and commentary) Eight Guidelines of Public Defense Related to Excessive
- 3 Workloads, dated August 2009.

## EIGHT GUIDELINES OF PUBLIC DEFENSE RELATED TO EXCESSIVE WORKLOADS

August 2009

### Introduction

The American Bar Association (ABA) has declared the achievement of quality representation as the objective for those who furnish defense services for persons charged in criminal and juvenile delinquency cases who cannot afford a lawyer. This goal is not achievable, however, when the lawyers providing the defense representation have too many cases, which frequently occurs throughout the United States. This was emphasized in the report of the ABA Standing Committee on Legal Aid and Indigent Defendants published in 2004, *Gideon's Broken Promise: America's Continuing Quest for Equal Justice*, available at [www.indigentdefense.org](http://www.indigentdefense.org). Additionally, in 2009, two national studies concerned with indigent defense documented the enormous caseloads of many of the lawyers who provide representation of the indigent and the crucial importance of addressing the problem.<sup>1</sup>

In 2006, the ABA Standing Committee on Ethics and Professional Responsibility issued its first ever ethics opinion concerning the obligations of lawyers, burdened with excessive caseloads, who provide indigent defense representation.<sup>2</sup> The opinion made clear that there are “no exceptions” for lawyers who represent indigent clients, i.e., *all* lawyers have a duty to furnish “competent” and “diligent” service, as required by rules of professional conduct.<sup>3</sup>

Although Formal Opinion 06-441 set forth *some* of the steps that those providing defense services should take when faced with excessive caseloads, neither the ethics opinion nor ABA

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<sup>1</sup> See Report of the National Right to Counsel Committee, *JUSTICE DENIED: AMERICA'S CONTINUING NEGLECT OF OUR CONSTITUTIONAL RIGHT TO COUNSEL* (The Constitution Project 2009)[hereinafter *JUSTICE DENIED*], available at [www.tcpjusticedenied.org](http://www.tcpjusticedenied.org); *MINOR CRIMES, MASSIVE WASTE: THE TERRIBLE TOLL OF AMERICA'S BROKEN MISDEMEANOR COURTS* (National Association of Criminal Defense Lawyers (2009) [hereinafter *MINOR CRIMES*], available at [www.nacdl.org/misdemeanor](http://www.nacdl.org/misdemeanor).

<sup>2</sup> ABA Comm. on Ethics and Prof'l Responsibility, Formal Op. 06-441 (2006)[hereinafter *ABA Formal Op. 06-441*].

<sup>3</sup> ABA MODEL RULES OF PROF'L CONDUCT R. 1.1, R. 1.3 (2008) [hereinafter *ABA MODEL RULES*].

Standards for Criminal Justice contain the kind of detailed action plan, set forth in these Guidelines, to which those providing public defense should adhere as they seek to comply with their professional responsibilities. Thus, Guideline 1 urges the management of public defense programs to assess whether excessive workloads are preventing their lawyers from fulfilling performance obligations; and Guidelines 2, 3, and 4 relate to the need for continuous supervision and monitoring of workloads, training of lawyers respecting their ethical duty when confronted with excessive workloads, and the need for management to determine if excessive workloads exist. Guidelines 5 through 8 address the range of options that public defense providers and their lawyers should consider when excessive workloads are present. As set forth in Guideline 6, depending upon the circumstances, it may be necessary for those providing public defense to seek redress in the courts, but other choices may be available, as suggested in Guideline 5, before this step is required.

These Guidelines are intended for the use of public defense programs and for lawyers who provide the representation, when they are confronted with too many persons to represent and are thus prevented from discharging their responsibilities under professional conduct rules. In addition, because these Guidelines contain important considerations for those responsible for indigent defense services, they should be valuable to a number of other audiences, including members of boards and commissions that oversee public defense representation, policymakers responsible for funding indigent defense, and judges who are called upon to address the caseload concerns of those who provide public defense services. Since these Guidelines relate directly to the fair, impartial, and effective administration of justice in our courts, they also should be of special interest to bar leaders, as well as to the legal profession and to the public.

## Guidelines with Comments

**1. The Public Defense Provider avoids excessive lawyer workloads and the adverse impact that such workloads have on providing quality legal representation to all clients. In determining whether these objectives are being achieved, the Provider considers whether the performance obligations of lawyers who represent indigent clients are being fulfilled, such as:**

- **whether sufficient time is devoted to interviewing and counseling clients;**
- **whether prompt interviews are conducted of detained clients and of those who are released from custody;**
- **whether pretrial release of incarcerated clients is sought;**
- **whether representation is continuously provided by the same lawyer from initial court appearance through trial, sentencing, or dismissal;**
- **whether necessary investigations are conducted;**
- **whether formal and informal discovery from the prosecution is pursued;**
- **whether sufficient legal research is undertaken;**
- **whether sufficient preparations are made for pretrial hearings and trials; and**
- **whether sufficient preparations are made for hearings at which clients are sentenced.**

### Comment

These Guidelines use “Public Defense Provider” or “Provider” to refer to public defender agencies and to programs that furnish assigned lawyers and contract lawyers. The words “lawyer” and “lawyers” refer to members of the bar employed by a defender agency, and those in private practice who accept appointments to cases for a fee or provide defense representation pursuant to contracts. The ABA long ago recognized the importance of indigent defense systems including “the active and substantial participation of the private bar...” provided “through a coordinated assigned-counsel system” and also perhaps including “contracts for services.”<sup>4</sup> In addition to covering all providers of defense services, these Guidelines are intended to apply both to adult and juvenile public defense systems. The objective of furnishing “quality legal representation” is American Bar Association policy

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<sup>4</sup> ABA STANDARDS FOR CRIMINAL JUSTICE: PROVIDING DEFENSE SERVICES, Std. 5-1.2(b) (3<sup>rd</sup> ed. 1992)[hereinafter ABA PROVIDING DEFENSE SERVICES].

related to indigent defense services.<sup>5</sup> This goal is consistent with the ABA's Model Rules of Professional Conduct, which require that "competent representation" be provided consisting of "the legal knowledge, skill, thoroughness and preparation reasonably necessary for the representation."<sup>6</sup> However, if workloads are excessive, neither competent nor quality representation is possible. As stated in the ABA's Model Rules, "[a] lawyer's workload must be controlled so that each matter can be handled competently."<sup>7</sup> In addition, it has been successfully argued that an excessive number of cases create a concurrent conflict of interest, as a lawyer is forced to choose among the interests of various clients, depriving at least some, if not all clients, of competent and diligent defense services.<sup>8</sup> The responsibilities of defense lawyers are contained in performance standards<sup>9</sup> and in professional responsibility rules governing the conduct of lawyers in all cases.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> "The objective in providing counsel should be to assure that quality legal representation is afforded to all persons eligible for counsel pursuant to this chapter." ABA PROVIDING DEFENSE SERVICES, *supra* note 4, Std. 5-1.1. See also ABA TEN PRINCIPLES OF A PUBLIC DEFENSE DELIVERY SYSTEM, Principle 5 (2002)[hereinafter ABA TEN PRINCIPLES ("Defense counsel's workload is controlled to permit the rendering of quality representation.")].

<sup>6</sup> ABA MODEL RULES, *supra* note 3, R. 1.1.

<sup>7</sup> *Id.* at R. 1.3, cmt. 2.

<sup>8</sup> "When excessive caseload forces the public defender to choose between the rights of the various indigent criminal defendants he represents, a conflict of interest is inevitably created." In *Re Order on Prosecution of Criminal Appeals by the Tenth Judicial Circuit Public Defender*, 561 So. 1130, 1135 (Fla. 1990). See also American Council of Chief Defenders, National Legal Aid and Defender Association, Ethics Opinion 03-01, at 4 (2003): "The duty to decline excess cases is based both on the prohibition against accepting cases which cannot be handled 'competently, promptly to completion' ... and the conflict-of-interest based requirement that a lawyer is prohibited from representing a client 'if the representation of that client may be materially limited by the lawyer's responsibility to another client.'" (citations omitted). A portion of the language last quoted is from ABA MODEL RULE R. 1.7 (a)(2).

<sup>9</sup> The most comprehensive and authoritative standards respecting the obligations of defense lawyers in criminal cases have been developed by the National Legal Aid and Defender Association. See PERFORMANCE GUIDELINES FOR CRIMINAL DEFENSE REPRESENTATION (4<sup>th</sup> Printing)(National Legal Aid and Defender Ass'n 2006). Important defense obligations also are contained in ABA STANDARDS FOR CRIMINAL JUSTICE, DEFENSE FUNCTION STANDARDS(3<sup>rd</sup> ed. 1993)[hereinafter ABA DEFENSE FUNCTION].

<sup>10</sup> See, e.g., ABA MODEL RULES, *supra* note 3, R 1.4, dealing with the obligation of lawyers to promptly and reasonably communicate with the client.

When defense lawyers fail to discharge the kinds of fundamental obligations contained in this Guideline, it is frequently because they have excessive workloads. For example, the failure of lawyers to interview clients thoroughly soon after representation begins and in advance of court proceedings, as necessary, is often due to excessive workloads.<sup>11</sup> When Public Defense Providers rely upon “horizontal” systems of representation, in which multiple lawyers represent the client at different stages of a case, and lawyers often stand in for one another at court proceedings, it is usually because there are too many cases for which the Provider is responsible.<sup>12</sup> If written motions are not filed, legal research not conducted, and legal memoranda not filed with the court, the lawyers most likely have an excessive workload. Similarly, excessive workloads may be the reason that crime scenes are not visited in cases where it might be useful to do so. Besides the performance obligations listed in Guideline 1, there are other indicia of excessive workloads, such as a lack of time for lawyers to participate in defense training programs, the need for which is addressed in Guideline 3 and the accompanying commentary.

- 2. The Public Defense Provider has a supervision program that continuously monitors the workloads of its lawyers to assure that all essential tasks on behalf of clients, such as those specified in Guideline 1, are performed.**

**Comment**

This Guideline is derived from the ABA Ten Principles of a Public Defense Delivery System and emphasizes the critical relationship between supervision and workloads. The ABA Ten Principles require that “workload[s]...[be] controlled” and that lawyers be “supervised and systematically reviewed for quality and efficiency according to nationally and locally

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<sup>11</sup> “As soon as practicable, defense counsel should seek to determine all relevant facts known to the accused.” ABA DEFENSE FUNCTION, *supra* note 9, Std. 4-3.2 (a). See also ABA TEN PRINCIPLES, *supra* note 5, Principle 4: “Defense Counsel is provided sufficient time and confidential space within which to meet with the client.”

<sup>12</sup> “Counsel initially provided should continue to represent the defendant throughout the trial court proceedings....” ABA PROVIDING DEFENSE SERVICES, *supra* note 4, Std. 5-6.2. See also ABA TEN PRINCIPLES, *supra* note 5, Principle 7: “The same attorney continuously represents the client until completion of the case.” These ABA policy statements do not preclude one or more lawyers with special expertise providing assistance to the lawyer originally assigned to provide representation, and such practices do not necessarily reflect excessive defense workloads.

adopted standards.”<sup>13</sup> “Workload,” as explained in the ABA Ten Principles, refers to “caseload adjusted by factors such as case complexity, support services, and an attorney’s nonrepresentational duties.”<sup>14</sup> The need for such oversight is just as important in programs that use assigned lawyers and contract lawyers as it is in public defender offices. When lawyers have a private practice in addition to their indigent defense representation, the extent of their private practice also must be considered in determining whether their workload is reasonable.<sup>15</sup> This applies to part-time public defenders, assigned lawyers, and contract lawyers.

The ABA endorses complete independence of the defense function, in which the judiciary is neither involved in the selection of counsel nor in their supervision.<sup>16</sup> This call for independence applies to public defender programs, as well as to indigent defense programs that furnish private assigned counsel<sup>17</sup> and legal representation through contracts.<sup>18</sup> Accordingly, the supervision called for under this Guideline is to be provided by seasoned lawyers who are experienced indigent defense practitioners and who act within a management structure that is independent of the judicial, executive and legislative branches of government.

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<sup>13</sup> ABA TEN PRINCIPLES, *supra* note 5, at Principles 5 and 10.

<sup>14</sup> *Id.* at Commentary to Principle 5.

<sup>15</sup> The Massachusetts Committee on Public Counsel Services makes extensive use of private lawyers and seeks to monitor the quality of representation they provide. See JUSTICE DENIED, *supra* note 1, at 194, n. 52. However, there are few public defense programs that monitor the *private* caseloads of assigned lawyers or contract lawyers to determine whether these caseloads might interfere with the provision of quality legal representation. *But see* Wash Rev. Code § 10.1-01.050 (2008): “Each individual or organization that contracts to perform public defense services for a county or city shall report...hours billed for nonpublic defense legal services in the previous calendar year, including number and types of private cases.”

<sup>16</sup> See *infra* note 54, which contains language from ABA PROVIDING DEFENSE SERVICES, *supra* note 4, dealing with the independence of the defense function.

<sup>17</sup> See also ABA PROVIDING DEFENSE SERVICES, *supra* note 4, Std. 5-2.1.

<sup>18</sup> See *id.* at Std. 5-3.2 (b).

Unless there is supervision of lawyer performance at regular intervals, reasonable workloads and quality representation are not likely to be achieved. Although variations in approach may be called for depending on the kinds of cases represented by the lawyer (e.g., misdemeanor, felony, juvenile, capital, appellate, post-conviction cases) and the lawyer's level of experience, supervision normally requires (1) that meetings be held between an experienced lawyer supervisor and the lawyer being supervised; (2) that the work on cases represented by the supervisee be thoroughly reviewed through case reviews, mock presentations or other thorough reviews; (3) that the lawyer supervisor reviews selected files of the supervisee; (4) that selected court documents prepared by the supervisee be reviewed; (5) that periodic court observations of the supervisee's representation of clients be conducted; and (6) that the number of cases represented by the supervisee, as well as their complexity and likely time commitments, be carefully assessed. In overseeing the work of those providing public defense services, it is important that supervisors have access to data through a management information system, which shows the lawyer's current caseload, the status of cases represented by the lawyer, and other important relevant data.<sup>19</sup>

- 3. The Public Defense Provider trains its lawyers in the professional and ethical responsibilities of representing clients, including the duty of lawyers to inform appropriate persons within the Public Defense Provider program when they believe their workload is unreasonable.**

**Comment**

The requirement of training for lawyers who provide public defense representation is well established ABA policy.<sup>20</sup> This Guideline emphasizes a particular subject area in which Public Defense Providers have an obligation to provide training. Lawyers who provide

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<sup>19</sup> The National Right to Counsel Committee recommends that systems of indigent defense establish "[u]niform definitions of a case and a continuous uniform case reporting system...for all criminal and juvenile cases. This system should provide continuous data that accurately contains the number of new appointments by case type, the number of new dispositions by case type, and the number of pending cases." JUSTICE DENIED, *supra* note 1, Recommendation 11, at 199. See also La. Rev. Stat. Ann. § 15-148 (B)(1) Supp. 2009), which requires the state's public defender agency to establish a uniform case reporting system, including data pertaining to workload.

<sup>20</sup> See ABA PROVIDING DEFENSE SERVICES, *supra* note 4, Std. 5-1.5; ABA TEN PRINCIPLES, *supra* note 5, Principles 6 and 9.

defense services need to be aware of their ethical responsibilities to provide “competent” and “diligent” representation, as required by rules of professional conduct,<sup>21</sup> as well as performance standards that will enable them to fulfill those duties. In addition, lawyers should be instructed that they have a responsibility to inform appropriate supervisors and/or managers within the Provider program when they believe their workload is preventing or soon will prevent them from complying with professional conduct rules.<sup>22</sup> This is especially important because there is an understandable reluctance of public defense lawyers to report to those in charge that they either are not, or may not, be providing services consistent with their ethical duties and performance standards. Despite such reluctance, defense lawyers need to make regular personal assessments of their workload to determine whether it is reasonable, whether they are performing the tasks necessary in order to be competent and diligent on behalf of their clients, and whether they need to communicate concerns about their workload to their supervisor. In discussing the ABA Model Rules and their application to excessive public defense caseloads, the ABA Standing Committee on Ethics and Professional Responsibility has explained that lawyers have a duty to inform their supervisors, the heads of defense programs, and, if applicable, the governing board of the Provider when lawyers believe that they have an excessive number of cases.<sup>23</sup> Conversely, it is important that Providers not take retaliatory action against lawyers who, in good faith, express concerns about their workloads.

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<sup>21</sup> See ABA MODEL RULES, *supra* note 3, R 1.1., 1.3.

<sup>22</sup> The ABA Model Rules contemplate that issues respecting the discharge of professional duties will be brought to the attention of supervisors: “A subordinate lawyer does not violate the Rules of Professional Conduct if that lawyer acts in accordance with a supervisory lawyer’s reasonable resolution of an arguable question of professional responsibility.” ABA MODEL RULES, *supra* note 3, R. 5.2 (b). See also ABA Formal Op. 06-441, *supra* note 2, at 5-6.

<sup>23</sup> “If the supervisor fails to provide appropriate assistance or relief, the lawyer should continue to advance up the chain of command within the office until relief is obtained or the lawyer has reached and requested assistance or relief from the head of the public defender’s office.... Such further action might include: if relief is not obtained from the head of the public defender’s office, appealing to the governing board, if any, of the public defender’s office....” ABA Formal Op 06-441, *supra* note 2, at 6.

- 4. Persons in Public Defense Provider programs who have management responsibilities determine, either on their own initiative or in response to workload concerns expressed by their lawyers, whether excessive lawyer workloads are present.**

**Comment**

Public Defense Providers should learn of excessive workloads when lawyers who provide defense services communicate their concerns to management or from the system for monitoring workloads used by the Provider.<sup>24</sup> Clearly, management should take seriously concerns about case overload expressed by lawyers since those providing client representation are best able to appreciate the daily pressures of their workload yet may be reluctant to complain. Regardless of the source of concerns, it is incumbent upon management to determine whether the volume of cases, perhaps in combination with other responsibilities, is preventing lawyers from providing “competent” and “diligent” representation and a failure to discharge their responsibilities under applicable performance standards.<sup>25</sup> Depending upon the circumstances, supervisors of lawyers and heads of Provider programs are accountable under professional conduct rules when violations of ethical duties are committed by subordinate lawyers for whom they are responsible.<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>24</sup> Client complaints may also be an indication that representation is inadequate due to excessive workloads. See, e.g., NAT'L LEGAL AID AND DEFENDER ASS'N, GUIDELINES FOR LEGAL DEFENSE SYSTEMS IN THE UNITED STATES: REPORT OF THE NATIONAL STUDY COMMISSION ON DEFENSE SERVICES 405 (1976).

<sup>25</sup> “As an essential first step, the supervisor must monitor the workloads of subordinate lawyers to ensure that the workload of each lawyer is appropriate. This involves consideration of the type and complexity of cases being handled by each lawyer; the experience and ability of each lawyer; the resources available to support her; and any non-representational responsibilities assigned to the subordinate lawyers.” ABA Formal Op 06-441, *supra* note 2, at 7. A supervisor’s assessment of the workloads of subordinate lawyers will be significantly aided if an adequate management information system is established, as noted in the Comment to Guideline 2 *supra*. As recognized in the ABA’s ethics opinion, the extent of support staff (e.g., investigators, social workers, and paralegals) to assist lawyers impacts the number of persons that a lawyer can represent. When adequate support personnel are lacking or if they have excessive caseloads, it is important for the Provider to seek additional personnel.

<sup>26</sup> “A lawyer shall be responsible for another lawyer’s violation of the Rules of Professional Conduct if: (1) the lawyer orders or, with knowledge of the specific conduct, ratifies the conduct involved; or (2) the lawyer is a partner or has comparable managerial authority in the law firm in which the other lawyer practices, or has direct supervisory authority over the other lawyer, and knows of the conduct at a time when its consequences can be avoided or mitigated but fails to take reasonable remedial action.” ABA MODEL RULES, *supra* note 3, R. 5.1 (c). “Firm” or “law firm” denotes...lawyers employed in a legal services organization or the legal department of a corporation or other organization.” *Id.* at R. 1.0 Terminology.

However, when a lawyer and supervisor disagree about whether the lawyer's workload is excessive, the decision of the supervisor is controlling if it is a "reasonable resolution of an arguable question of professional duty."<sup>27</sup> Where the resolution of the supervisor is not reasonable, the lawyer must take further action.<sup>28</sup>

Consistent with prior ABA policy, these Guidelines do not endorse specific numerical caseload standards, except to reiterate a statement contained in the commentary to existing principles approved by the ABA: "National caseload standards should in no event be exceeded."<sup>29</sup> This statement refers to numerical annual caseload limits published in a 1973 national report.<sup>30</sup> As noted by the ABA Standing Committee on Ethics and Professional Responsibility, while these standards "may be considered, they are not the sole factor in determining whether a workload is excessive. Such a determination depends not only the number of cases, but also on such factors as case complexity, the availability of support

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Responsibility for lawyer conduct may also extend to lawyer members of governing boards of Public Defense Providers.

<sup>27</sup> See ABA MODEL RULES, *supra* note 3, R. 5.2 (b), quoted in note 22 *supra*.

<sup>28</sup> This includes the possibility of filing motions to withdraw from a sufficient number of cases to permit representation to be provided consistent with professional conduct rules. See ABA Formal Op 06-441, *supra* note 2, at 6, and language quoted *supra* in note 20.

<sup>29</sup> ABA TEN PRINCIPLES, *supra* note 5, Commentary to Principle 5, at 2.

<sup>30</sup> "In its report on the Courts, the Commission [National Advisory Commission on Criminal Justice Standards and Goals] recommended the following maximum annual caseloads for a public defender office, i.e., on average, the lawyers in the office should not exceed, per year, more than 150 felonies; 400 misdemeanors; 200 juvenile court cases; 200 mental health cases; or 25 appeals." JUSTICE DENIED, *supra* note 1, at 66. As noted in JUSTICE DENIED, these caseload numbers are 35 years old, the numbers were never "empirically based," and were intended "for a public defender's office, not necessarily for each individual attorney in that office." *Id.* In fact, the Commission warned of the "dangers of proposing any national guidelines." *Id.* The American Council of Chief Defenders, a unit of the National Legal Aid and Defender Association comprised of the heads of defender programs in the United States, also has urged that the caseload numbers contained in the 1973 Commission report not be exceeded. See *American Council of Chief Defenders Statement on Caseloads and Workloads*, August 24, 2007. Some state and local governments have set limits on the number of cases that defense lawyers can handle on an annual basis. See *infra* note 37.

services, the lawyer's experience and ability, and the lawyer's nonrepresentational duties."<sup>31</sup> Thus, while the ABA has not endorsed specific caseload numbers, except to the limited extent discussed above, the routine failure to fulfill performance obligations like those listed in Guideline 1, usually indicates that lawyers have excessive workloads.

**5. Public Defense Providers consider taking prompt actions such as the following to avoid workloads that either are or are about to become excessive:**

- **Providing additional resources to assist the affected lawyers;**
- **Curtailing new case assignments to the affected lawyers;**
- **Reassigning cases to different lawyers within the defense program, with court approval, if necessary;**
- **Arranging for some cases to be assigned to private lawyers in return for reasonable compensation for their services;**
- **Urging prosecutors not to initiate criminal prosecutions when civil remedies are adequate to address conduct and public safety does not require prosecution;**
- **Seeking emergency resources to deal with excessive workloads or exemptions from funding reductions;**
- **Negotiating formal and informal arrangements with courts or other appointing authorities respecting case assignments; and**
- **Notifying courts or other appointing authorities that the Provider is unavailable to accept additional appointments.**

**Comment**

Some of the most important ways in which a Provider may be able to reduce excessive lawyer workloads are listed in this Guideline. When workloads have been determined to be excessive, the steps suggested will be appropriate to pursue if they can be quickly achieved. However, if the steps will take a good deal of time to achieve, they will likely be appropriate to pursue *only in advance* of the time that workloads actually have become excessive. In other words, once workloads are determined to be excessive, a Provider must be able to achieve immediate relief; when this is not possible, the Provider must seek relief as set forth in Guideline 6.

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<sup>31</sup> ABA Formal Op 06-441, *supra* note 2, at 4.

This Guideline is based on the assumption that judges are appointing either the Public Defense Provider or its lawyers to the cases of indigent clients. In jurisdictions in which the Provider is not appointed by judges or court representatives, but instead clients are simply referred to the defense program, the Provider is required to decline representation if acceptance would result in a violation of the rules of professional conduct.<sup>32</sup> Providers who continue to accept cases when an excessive workload is present will fail to provide competent and diligent services as required under rules of professional conduct, have an arguable conflict of interest because of the multiple clients competing for their time and attention,<sup>33</sup> and may be unable to fulfill their duties under the Sixth Amendment.<sup>34</sup>

In the more usual situation in which courts assign cases to the Public Defense Provider, the cooperation of courts may be necessary in order to implement some of the alternatives suggested in this Guideline. One of the most straightforward ways to address excessive lawyer workloads is for the Provider and judges or other officials to negotiate informal arrangements to suspend or reduce new court assignments, with the understanding that additional cases will be represented by assigned counsel, contract lawyers, or other Provider program. This may not be a feasible alternative, however, if funds are not available to compensate the lawyers.<sup>35</sup> It may also be possible to persuade a court to order, or for the funding authority to authorize, that additional resources be provided due either to the complexity of certain types of cases or to one or two particularly time-

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<sup>32</sup> "Except as stated in paragraph (c) [where a court orders counsel to proceed with representation], a lawyer shall not represent a client or, where representation has commenced, shall withdraw from the representation of a client if the representation will result in violation of the rules of professional conduct or other law." ABA MODEL RULES, *supra* note 3, R. 1.16 (a)(1).

<sup>33</sup> See *supra* note 8 and accompanying text.

<sup>34</sup> See discussion of litigation in JUSTICE DENIED, *supra* note 1, at 110-128.

<sup>35</sup> "[A]ttorneys in several states have successfully argued that a state's refusal to provide adequate compensation amounts to a taking of property under federal or state constitutions, and just compensation must therefore be paid. There appear to be no recent decisions of state appellate courts requiring that lawyers provide pro bono service in indigent criminal and juvenile cases." JUSTICE DENIED, *supra* note 1, at 104-05. The ABA has recognized that "[g]overnment has the responsibility to fund the full cost of quality legal representation for all eligible persons...." ABA PROVIDING DEFENSE SERVICES, *supra* note 4, Std. 5-1.6.

consuming cases.<sup>36</sup> Further, it may be possible to arrange through either contract or legislation a limit on the number and types of cases annually assigned to lawyers.<sup>37</sup>

In some jurisdictions where courts appoint counsel, it may nevertheless be possible for the Provider simply to notify judges or other officials that lawyers from the defense program are unavailable to accept appointments in all or certain categories of cases for a specified period of time or until further notice. A declaration of “unavailability” has sometimes been used successfully, such as in some counties in California. This approach is seemingly based on the implicit premise that governments, which establish and fund providers of public defense, never intended that the lawyers who furnish the representation would be asked to do so if it meant violating their ethical duties pursuant to professional conduct rules. On the other hand, some Providers may conclude that this approach is either not contemplated by the jurisdiction’s statutes<sup>38</sup> or is otherwise deemed inappropriate.

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<sup>36</sup> For example, pursuant to a motion of The Defender Association in Seattle, Washington, a trial court ordered increased “attorney fees and paralegal fees and investigation fees to the levels requested...[as] necessary to provide effective assistance of counsel.” See *In the Detention of Kevin Ambers, et al.*, Superior Court of Washington for King County, Order Granting Respondent’s Motion for Increased Payment for Respondent’s Counsel on above Consolidated Cases, January 20, 2006, available at <http://www.defender.org/files/archive/judgelauorderjan202006.pdf>.

<sup>37</sup> The New Hampshire Public Defender, a nonprofit organization that provides defense services, enters into a contract with the state’s Judicial Council that contains caseload limitations and requires the defender program to notify the courts if caseloads are too high so that private lawyers can be appointed. See *JUSTICE DENIED*, *supra* note 1, at 168. In Seattle, the City Council has enacted an ordinance that imposes a ceiling on the number of cases to which lawyers may be assigned annually. The ordinance can be accessed on the website of The Defender Association serving Seattle and King County, Washington. See <http://www.defender.org/node/18>. In Massachusetts, legislation authorizes the Committee on Public Counsel Services to establish “standards” that contain “caseload limitation levels” both for private assigned lawyers and public defenders. See Mass. G. L., Chapter 211D, §9 (c) (2009).

<sup>38</sup> Consider, for example, the law in Colorado pertaining to the Colorado State Public Defender: “The state public defender shall represent as counsel...each indigent person who is under arrest for or charged with committing a felony.” Colo. Rev. Stat. § 21-1-103 (2004); “Case overload, lack of resources, and other similar circumstances shall not constitute a conflict of interest.” *Id.* at § 21-2-103. This statute is contrary to rules of professional conduct governing lawyers and with these Guidelines.

In addition to the options listed in this Guideline for dealing with excessive caseloads, there may be other ways in which Public Defense Providers can seek to achieve caseload reductions. For example, two national studies issued in 2009 recommended that legislatures consider reclassifying certain offenses as civil infractions so that the need to provide lawyers is removed, assuming there are not adverse public safety consequences.<sup>39</sup> However, if this course is followed, it is important that the possible adverse collateral consequences resulting from a conviction be carefully considered along with any new legislation since a defense lawyer will not be available to counsel the person.<sup>40</sup> Another alternative that can serve to reduce public defense caseloads is for cases to be diverted from the criminal justice system during the pretrial stage. Depending on the jurisdiction, implementation will require legislation, a change in court rules, or approval of prosecutors.<sup>41</sup>

When a Provider cannot reduce excessive lawyer workloads, a motion filed with the court, aimed at stopping case assignments and/or permitting lawyers to withdraw from cases (see Guideline 6 *infra*), or conceivably the filing of a separate civil action, will be necessary. Regardless of the type of litigation pursued, it is almost certain to be time-consuming, labor intensive, and the results not easily predicted. In addition, speedy resolution of the matter may prove elusive. If a trial court decision is adverse to the Provider, an appeal may be required. If the Provider is successful in the trial court, the state may appeal. Moreover, the trial court may simply fail to render a prompt decision

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<sup>39</sup> The National Association of Criminal Defense Lawyers has urged that “[o]ffenses that do not involve a significant risk to public safety...be decriminalized” and cites successful examples where this has occurred. See *MINOR CRIMES*, *supra* note 1, at 27-8. Similarly, the National Right to Counsel Committee has suggested that “certain non-serious misdemeanors...be reclassified, thereby reducing financial and other pressures on a state’s indigent defense system,” and also notes examples where this has taken place. See *JUSTICE DENIED*, *supra* note 1, at 198.

<sup>40</sup> “Under these circumstances, to impose harsh collateral consequences of a conviction, like housing limitations, deportation, and employment limitations would be fundamentally unfair.” *MINOR CRIMES*, *supra* note 1, at 28.

<sup>41</sup> See John Clark, *PRETRIAL DIVERSION AND THE LAW: A SAMPLING OF FOUR DECADES OF APPELLATE COURT RULINGS I-1-I-2* (Pretrial Justice Institute 2006).

in the matter. Accordingly, every effort should be made to resolve excessive workloads without resort to litigation, which is why the options specified in Guideline 5 are so important.

- 6. Public Defense Providers or lawyers file motions asking a court to stop the assignment of new cases and to withdraw from current cases, as may be appropriate, when workloads are excessive and other adequate alternatives are unavailable.**

**Comment**

When alternative options for dealing with excessive workloads, such as those listed in Guideline 5, are exhausted, insufficient, or unavailable, the Public Defense Provider is obligated to seek relief from the court. Thus, a court should be asked to stop additional assignments in all or certain types of cases and, if necessary, that lawyers be permitted to withdraw from representation in certain cases. Continued representation in the face of excessive workloads imposes a mandatory duty to take corrective action in order to avoid furnishing legal services in violation of professional conduct rules.<sup>42</sup> If representation is furnished pursuant to court appointment, withdrawal from representation usually requires judicial approval.<sup>43</sup> Because lawyers have as their primary obligation the responsibility to represent the interests of current clients, withdrawals from representation is less preferable than seeking to halt the assignment of new appointments.<sup>44</sup> Normally, Providers, rather than individual lawyers, will take the initiative and move to suspend new case assignments and, if necessary, move to withdraw from cases since the Provider has the responsibility to monitor lawyer workloads (Guideline 1), determine whether workloads are excessive (Guideline 4), and explore options other than litigation (Guideline 5). If the Public Defense

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<sup>42</sup> See ABA MODEL RULES, *supra* note 3, R. 1.16 (a)(1), quoted in note 29 *supra*. See also discussion in Comment to Guideline 1 *supra*. It may also be appropriate to include in a motion to withdraw a request that charges against one or more clients be dismissed due to the failure of the government to provide effective assistance of counsel as required by federal and state law.

<sup>43</sup> "When a lawyer has been appointed to represent a client, withdrawal ordinarily requires approval of the appointing authority." ABA MODEL RULES, *supra* note 3, R. 1.16, cmt. 2.

<sup>44</sup> "A lawyer's primary ethical duty is owed to existing clients." ABA Formal Op 06-441, *supra* note 2, at 4.

Provider has complied with Guidelines 1 through 4, it should be in an especially strong position to show that its workload is excessive, and its representations regarding workloads should be accepted by the court.<sup>45</sup> Nevertheless, in making its motion to the court, the Provider may deem it advisable to present statistical data, anecdotal information, as well as other kinds of evidence.<sup>46</sup> The Provider also may want to enlist the help of a private law firm with expertise in civil litigation that is willing to provide representation on a pro bono basis. There are notable examples in which private firms have volunteered their time and been extremely helpful to Providers in litigating issues related to excessive workloads.<sup>47</sup> As discussed earlier, an individual lawyer is obliged to take action when there is disagreement with those in charge of the Provider about whether the lawyer has an excessive workload and the lawyer concludes that Provider officials have made an unreasonable decision respecting the matter.<sup>48</sup>

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<sup>45</sup> See also *infra* notes 49-52 and accompanying text.

<sup>46</sup> See discussion of litigation respecting such motions in *JUSTICE DENIED*, *supra* note 1, at 144-45.

<sup>47</sup> The following observation, offered in discussing the role of volunteer lawyers in litigating systemic challenges to indigent defense systems, is also applicable to litigating motions to withdraw and/or to halt additional appointments: “[E]xternal counsel affiliated with law firms, bar associations, or public interest organizations who are willing to provide pro bono representation can make significant contributions. Besides possessing the necessary experience, they are likely to have more time, personnel, and resources than do public defenders to devote to a major systemic challenge. They also are used to conducting extensive discovery, preparing exhibits, and may have funds to retain necessary experts.” *Id.* at 143.

<sup>48</sup> See *supra* notes 27-28 and accompanying text. See also ABA Model Rules, *supra* note 3, R. 5.2 (b), quoted in note 22 *supra*. See also Norman Lefstein and Georgia Vagenas, *Restraining Excessive Defender Caseloads: The ABA Ethics Committee Requires Action*, 30 *THE CHAMPION* 12-13 (Nat’l Assoc. Crim. Defense Lawyers, December 2006); and ABA Formal Op 06-441, *supra* note 2, at 1, 4-6. In 2009, a California appellate court endorsed the approach of the ABA’s ethics opinion: “Under the ABA opinion, a deputy public defender whose excessive workload obstructs his or her ability to provide effective assistance to a particular client should, with supervisory approval, attempt to reduce the caseload, as by transferring cases to another lawyer with a lesser caseload. If the deputy public defender is unable to obtain relief in that manner, the ABA opinion provides that he or she must ‘file a motion with the trial court requesting permission to withdraw from a sufficient number of cases to allow the provision of competent and diligent representation to the remaining clients.’... The conduct prescribed by the ABA Opinion, which is fully consistent with the California Rules of Professional Conduct, may also be statutorily mandated.” *In re Edward S.*, 173 Cal. App. 4<sup>th</sup> 387, 413, 92 Cal. Rptr. 3d 725, 746 (Cal. App. 1<sup>st</sup> Dist. 2009). This decision cites with approval an earlier California decision, *Ligda v. Superior Court*, 85 Cal. Rptr. 744, 754 (Cal. Ct. App. 1970) (“[w]hen a public defender reels under a staggering workload, he

**7. When motions to stop the assignment of new cases and to withdraw from cases are filed, Public Defense Providers and lawyers resist judicial directions regarding the management of Public Defense Programs that improperly interfere with their professional and ethical duties in representing their clients.**

**Comment**

The concern that underlies this Guideline relates to the risk that judges confronted with motions to halt the assignment of new cases or to permit lawyers to withdraw from cases will delve inappropriately into the internal operations of Public Defense Providers. While it is appropriate for judges to review motions asking that assignments be stopped and withdrawals from cases are permitted, courts should not undertake to micro-manage the operations of defense programs.<sup>49</sup>

When Providers file motions requesting that assignments be stopped and that withdrawals be permitted, their prayer for relief should be accorded substantial deference because Providers are in the best position to assess the workloads of their lawyers. As the ABA has noted, “[o]nly the lawyers themselves know how much must be done to represent their clients and how much time the preparation is likely to take.”<sup>50</sup> In discussing a defense lawyer’s claim of conflict of interest in representing co-defendants, the Supreme Court has noted that “attorneys are officers of the court, and ‘when they address the judge solemnly upon a matter before the court, their declarations are virtually made under oath.’”<sup>51</sup> In an accompanying footnote, the Court further declared: “When a considered representation

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... should proceed to place the situation before the judge, who upon a satisfactory showing can relieve him, and order the employment of private counsel at public expense.”)

<sup>49</sup> “We acknowledge the public defender’s argument that the courts should not involve themselves in the management of public defender offices.” *In re Certification of Conflict in Motions to Withdraw*, 636 So.2d 18, 21-22 (Fla. 1994).

<sup>50</sup> ABA PROVIDING DEFENSE SERVICES, *supra* note 4, at 71. See also *State v. Smith*, 681 P.2d 1374, 1381 (Ariz. 1984)(“Attorneys are in a position to know when a contract [for defense services] will result in inadequate representation of counsel.”)

<sup>51</sup> *Holloway v. Arkansas*, 435 U.S. 475, 486 (1978).

regarding a conflict of interest comes from an officer of the court, it should be given the weight commensurate with the grave penalties risked for misrepresentation.”<sup>52</sup>

The ABA has recognized that the judiciary needs to ensure that Providers and their lawyers are not forced to accept unreasonable numbers of cases: “Courts should not require individuals or programs to accept caseloads that will lead to the furnishing of representation lacking in quality or to the breach of professional obligations.”<sup>53</sup> This Guideline is a corollary to the well accepted proposition that defense services should be independent of the judicial and executive branches of government.<sup>54</sup> Thus, an ABA standard recommends that “[t]he selection of lawyers for specific cases should not be made by the judiciary or elected officials....”<sup>55</sup> This same standard also urges that the plan for

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<sup>52</sup> *Id.*, at n. 9. Judges should be especially understanding of the representations of Providers given that the “judiciary plays a central in preserving the principles of justice and the rule of law.” ABA CODE OF JUDICIAL CONDUCT, Preamble (2007). Similarly, prosecutors have a duty “to seek justice ... [and] to reform and improve the administration of criminal justice.” ABA STANDARDS FOR CRIMINAL JUSTICE: PROSECUTION FUNCTION STANDARDS, Std.3-1.2 (c), (d) (3<sup>rd</sup> ed., 1993). However, when a Provider seeks relief in court from an excessive workload, the prosecutor seemingly has a conflict of interest in opposing the Provider’s motion. Not only do the decisions of prosecutors in filing charges against persons directly impact the caseloads of Providers, but the likelihood of successful prosecutions are enhanced if Providers are burdened with excessive caseloads. The adversary system is premised on the assumption that justice is best served when both sides in litigation are adequately funded and have sufficient time to prepare their respective cases.

<sup>53</sup> ABA PROVIDING DEFENSE SERVICES, *supra* note 4, Std. 5-5.3 (b). Sometimes the problem is not the number of cases, but the pressure placed on defense lawyers to proceed when they have not had sufficient time to prepare. In an Ohio case, a public defender was prepared to represent his client, but asked for a continuance before proceeding to trial because he had just been appointed earlier the same day and lacked sufficient time to interview witnesses. The trial court denied the public defender’s request for a continuance and held the lawyer in contempt because of his refusal to proceed to trial. In reversing the contempt finding, the court concluded that the trial judge had “improperly placed an administrative objective of controlling the court’s docket above its supervisory imperative of facilitating effective, prepared representation at trial.” *State v. Jones*, 2008 WL 5428009, at \*5 (Ohio App. 2008).

<sup>54</sup> “The legal representation plan for the jurisdiction should be designed to guarantee the integrity of the relationship between lawyer and client. The plan and the lawyers serving under it should be...subject to judicial supervision only in the same manner and to the same extent as are lawyers in private practice. The selection of lawyers for specific cases should not be made by the judiciary....” ABA PROVIDING DEFENSE SERVICES, *supra* note 4, at Std. 5-1.3 (a).

<sup>55</sup> *Id.*

legal representation “guarantee the integrity of the relationship between lawyer and client.”<sup>56</sup>

**8. Public Defense Providers or lawyers appeal a court’s refusal to stop the assignment of new cases or a court’s rejection of a motion to withdraw from cases of current clients.**

**Comment**

The ABA Standing Committee on Ethics and Professional Responsibility has indicated that a trial court’s denial of motions to halt appointments or to withdraw from pending cases should be appealed, if possible.<sup>57</sup> An appeal or an application for a writ of mandamus or prohibition should properly be regarded as a requirement of “diligence” under professional conduct rules.<sup>58</sup> However, if a defense motion is rejected and an appeal is not permitted, the Public Defense Provider usually has no choice except to continue to provide representation.<sup>59</sup> Similarly, if the motion for relief is granted but implementation of the order is stayed pending appeal, the Provider will likely have to continue to provide representation.<sup>60</sup> This places the Provider in an extremely awkward situation since on the one hand those in charge of the defense program have made it clear that, in their professional judgment, caseloads are excessive and the lawyers providing direct client services are being forced to violate their ethical responsibilities, yet relief is unavailable. Accordingly, the Provider should continue to explore non-litigation alternatives (*see* Guideline 5) while requiring the Provider’s lawyers to make a record in their cases, if

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<sup>56</sup> *Id.*

<sup>57</sup> “If the court denies the lawyer’s motion to withdraw, and any available means of appealing such ruling is unsuccessful, the lawyer must continue with the representation while taking whatever steps are feasible to ensure that she will be able to competently and diligently represent the defendant.” ABA Formal Op 06-441, *supra* note 2, at 1.

<sup>58</sup> “A lawyer should pursue a matter on behalf of a client...and take whatever lawful and ethical measures are required to vindicate a client’s cause or endeavor. A lawyer must also act with zeal in advocacy upon the client’s behalf.” ABA MODEL RULES, *supra* note 3, R. 1.3, cmt. 1.

<sup>59</sup> “When ordered to do so, by a tribunal, a lawyer shall continue representation notwithstanding good cause for terminating the representation.” *Id.*, R. 1.16 (c). *See also supra* note 32.

<sup>60</sup> However, the Provider or lawyer also will likely want to proceed expeditiously in the appellate court to strike the stay or modify the order pending appeal.

appropriate, about the lawyers' inability, due to excessive caseloads, to furnish "competent" and "diligent" representation as required by professional conduct rules. The Public Defense Provider should also continue to seek public support from bar associations, community groups, and the media.<sup>61</sup>

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<sup>61</sup> "Theoretically, when judges resolve court cases concerning indigent defense reform, it should be irrelevant whether the litigation is covered by print and other news media. Nor should it matter whether prominent persons in the state or community speak publicly in favor of necessary changes in the delivery of indigent defense services. However, the reality is that news reports about problems in indigent defense and strong public support for improvements may make a difference not only when legislatures consider new laws, but also when courts decide difficult cases." JUSTICE DENIED, *supra* note 1, at 146.

## Report

### Introduction

Throughout the United States, there is a lack of adequate funding to provide legal representation for persons in criminal and juvenile delinquency cases who have a Constitutional right to a lawyer but are unable to afford representation. As a result, public defender agencies and their lawyers are routinely faced with enormous caseloads. Defenders, therefore, are unable to represent their indigent clients effectively as required by the Sixth Amendment to the U.S. Constitution and from providing competent and diligent representation as required by rules of professional conduct.

The **Eight Guidelines of Public Defense Related to Excessive Workloads** [hereinafter "Guidelines"] contain a well thought out course of action not only for public defender agencies forced to deal with too many cases, but also for other providers of indigent defense services with excessive workloads. These include lawyers who accept appointments to cases as part of an assignment program and lawyers who enter into contracts to provide indigent defense services.

### Excessive Caseloads Are a National Problem

The problem of excessive caseloads among public defense providers has been documented in numerous national, state, and local reports over a period of many years. Recently, two national reports on indigent defense services in the United States were published. The first of these was released in April 2009 by the Constitution Project, on behalf of the National Right to Counsel Committee, an independent and diverse group representing all major constituencies of the justice system, i.e., the judiciary, prosecution, police, and the defense. The Committee was organized by the Constitution Project and the National Legal Aid & Defender Association. In its report, the Committee offered the following assessment of public defense caseloads:

Undoubtedly, the most visible sign of inadequate funding is attorneys attempting to provide defense services while carrying astonishingly large caseloads. Frequently, public defenders are asked to represent far too many clients. Sometimes the defenders have well over 100 clients at a time, with many clients charged with serious offenses, and their cases moving quickly through the court system. As a consequence, defense lawyers are constantly forced to violate their oaths as attorneys because their caseloads make it impossible for them to practice law as they are required to do according to the profession's rules. They cannot interview their clients properly, effectively seek their pretrial release, file appropriate motions, conduct necessary fact investigations, negotiate responsibly with the prosecutor, adequately prepare for hearings, and perform countless other tasks that normally would be undertaken by a lawyer with sufficient time and resources. Yes, the clients have lawyers, but lawyers with crushing

caseloads who, through no fault of their own, provide second-rate legal services, simply because it is not humanly possible for them to do otherwise.<sup>62</sup>

The second recent national study, published in May 2009 by the National Association of Criminal Defense Lawyers, focuses on the problems of indigent defense representation in misdemeanor cases. The report summed up the caseload problems in lower courts this way:

Almost 40 years later, the misdemeanor criminal justice system is rife with the same problems that existed prior to the *Argersinger* decision.<sup>63</sup> Legal representation for indigent defendants is absent in many cases. Even when an attorney is provided to defend a misdemeanor case, crushing workloads make it impossible for many defenders to effectively represent clients. Too often, counsel is unable to spend sufficient time on each of their cases. This forces even the most competent and dedicated attorneys to run afoul of their professional duties. Frequently, judges and prosecutors are complicit in these breaches, pushing defenders to take action with inadequate time, despite knowing that the defense attorney lacks appropriate information about the case and the client.<sup>64</sup>

In 2004, the ABA Standing Committee on Legal Aid and Indigent Defendants (SCLAID) issued the Association's most recent national report on indigent defense services. This report, based upon hearings held at four locations across the country during 2003,<sup>65</sup> commemorated the fortieth anniversary of the Supreme Court's decision in *Gideon v. Wainwright*.<sup>66</sup> In referring to the number of cases that public defenders are asked to handle, the report summarized the testimony of numerous witnesses: "[T]he hearings revealed that oftentimes caseloads...[make] it impossible for even the most industrious of lawyers to deliver effective representation in all cases."<sup>67</sup> Twenty-two years earlier, SCLAID offered a similar assessment of caseloads of those providing public defense services.<sup>68</sup>

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<sup>62</sup> JUSTICE DENIED: AMERICA'S CONTINUING NEGLECT OF OUR CONSTITUTIONAL RIGHT TO COUNSEL 17 (The Constitution Project 2009)[hereinafter JUSTICE DENIED].

<sup>63</sup> This is a reference to the Supreme Court's decision in *Argersinger v. Hamlin*, 407 U.S. 25 (1972). This decision essentially established the right to a lawyer at government expense in misdemeanor cases.

<sup>64</sup> MINOR CRIMES, MASSIVE WASTE: THE TERRIBLE TOLL OF AMERICA'S BROKEN MISDEMEANOR COURTS (National Association of Criminal Defense Lawyers 14 (2009).

<sup>65</sup> GIDEON'S BROKEN PROMISE: AMERICA'S CONTINUING QUEST FOR EQUAL JUSTICE (American Bar Association 2004).

<sup>66</sup> 372 U.S. 375 (1963).

<sup>67</sup> *Id.* at 18

<sup>68</sup> See GIDEON UNDONE: THE CRISIS IN INDIGENT DEFENSE FUNDING (American Bar Association, John Thomas Moran ed., 1982).

## **ABA Ethics Opinion Dealing with Excessive Caseloads**

In 2006, the ABA Standing Committee on Ethics and Professional Responsibility issued Formal Opinion 06-441 concerning the ethical obligations of indigent defense lawyers burdened with excessive caseloads. The opinion made clear that there are “no exceptions” for lawyers who represent indigent clients – *all* lawyers have a duty to furnish “competent” and “diligent” service, as required by rules of professional conduct. Accordingly, as directed by the ABA Model Rules of Professional Conduct, the opinion admonishes defense programs and lawyers to move to withdraw from cases if they are unable to furnish representation in compliance with their ethical duties. The opinion also advises lawyers that if clients are being assigned through a court appointment system, which is often what occurs in indigent defense, the lawyers should advise the court not to make any new appointments.

Formal Opinion 06-441, therefore, sets forth several basic steps that those providing defense services should take when faced with excessive caseloads. However, the opinion does not contain a *detailed action plan* to which public defense providers should adhere as they seek to comply with their professional responsibilities. The purpose of the proposed Guidelines is to do just that, as more fully explained below.

## **ABA Standards and Principles Related to Excessive Caseloads**

Much like the ABA’s new ethics opinion concerning indigent defense representation, a detailed plan for dealing with excessive caseloads is lacking in the ABA’s Standards for Criminal Justice and in the ABA Ten Principles of a Public Defense Delivery System. This is understandable since neither these standards nor principles deal with subjects in as much detail as contained in the proposed Guidelines. Thus, a standard in the ABA’s Defense Function Standards simply advises “[d]efense counsel...[not to] carry a workload that, by reason of its excessive size, interferes with the rendering of quality representation, endangers the client’s interest in the speedy disposition of charges, or may lead to the breach of professional obligations.”<sup>69</sup> Similarly, the ABA’s Providing Defense Services Standards urges indigent defense lawyers with excessive caseloads to “take such steps as may be appropriate to reduce their pending or projected caseloads, including the refusal of further appointments.”<sup>70</sup> The ABA’s Ten Principles of a Public Defense Delivery System, which is largely based on Providing Defense Services, reads as follows: “Defense counsel’s workload is controlled to permit the rendering of quality representation.”<sup>71</sup>

## **The Eight Guidelines: Why They Are Needed and What They Do**

The problem of excessive indigent defense caseloads has become especially acute during the past year due to America’s slumping economy, which has led to more

<sup>69</sup> ABA STANDARDS FOR CRIMINAL JUSTICE, DEFENSE FUNCTION 4-1.3 (e)(3d ed., 1992).

<sup>70</sup> ABA STANDARDS FOR CRIMINAL JUSTICE, PROVIDING DEFENSE SERVICES 5-5.3(b)(3d ed., 1992).

<sup>71</sup> ABA TEN PRINCIPLES OF A PUBLIC DEFENSE DELIVERY SYSTEM, Principle 5 (2002).

restricted funding for public defense providers. As the recent report of the National Right to Counsel Committee warned, “[i]n the country’s current economic crisis, indigent defense may be further curtailed.... Although troubles in indigent defense have long existed, the need for reform has never been more urgent.”<sup>72</sup> The proposed Eight Guidelines build upon the ABA’s Formal Opinion 06-411, the ABA’s Criminal Justice Standards, and the ABA’s Ten Principles of a Public Defense Delivery System. Because the Guidelines contain a complete and coherent approach to dealing with excessive defender caseloads, their implementation by indigent defense providers will contribute to important reform at an especially critical time.

Specifically, Guideline 1 advises the management of public defense providers to assess whether excessive workloads are preventing lawyers from fulfilling their performance obligations under nationally accepted standards, as well as complying with professional conduct rules. This first Guideline also offers an important list of factors for public defense providers to consider in deciding whether their caseloads are too high. Guidelines 2, 3, and 4 relate to the need for continuous supervision and monitoring of workloads, training of lawyers respecting their ethical responsibilities when confronted with excessive workloads and the need for management to determine if excessive workloads exist. Guideline 5 sets forth a number of non-litigation alternatives for public defense providers to pursue in an effort to address excessive workloads. Guideline 6 recognizes that if non-litigation alternatives are “unavailable, or been proven to be unsuccessful or inadequate,” those responsible for public defense are obligated to seek formal redress in the courts. Guidelines 7 and 8 deal with important practices to which public defense providers should adhere in challenging their caseloads through litigation.

### **Conclusion**

The proposed Guidelines will enhance the fairness of our nation’s criminal and juvenile courts while enabling lawyers to discharge their duty under the Constitution and also comply with their ethical obligations in accordance with rules of the legal profession. The Guidelines are intended for use by both public defense organizations and their lawyers when they have excessive workloads. In addition, the Guidelines should be valuable to a number of other audiences, including members of boards and commissions that oversee public defense representation, policymakers responsible for funding indigent defense, and judges who are called upon to address the caseload concerns of those who provide public defense services. Moreover, since these Guidelines relate directly to the quality of justice in our courts, they should be of special interest to bar leaders, as well as to the legal profession and to the public.

Respectfully submitted,

Deborah G. Hankinson, Chair  
Standing Committee on Legal Aid and Indigent Defendants

August, 2009

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<sup>72</sup> JUSTICE DENIED, *supra* note 1, at 2.