

General Counsel Lisa Hewitt Testifies in Favor of a Bill that Provides Retirement Parity for Long Term Public Defenders

CPCS General Counsel Lisa Hewitt testified on behalf of CPCS at a hearing of the Joint Committee on Public Service on September 15, 2015, in support of S.1355 – An Act to Establish Retirement Parity for Long Term Public Defenders. The bill, which CPCS requested, would add CPCS attorneys, social workers, and investigators to the Commonwealth's Group 4 retirement system. In advocating for true parity with our counterparts in the District Attorneys' offices, the General Counsel offered a number of examples of how CPCS staff is placed in harm's way and can be at risk of injury, both physically and emotionally.

She relayed incidents collected from members of the CPCS staff that included exposure to serious communicable diseases, inappropriate and suggestive advances, stalking, threats, and bodily injury, and explained that such incidents can be perpetrated not only by our clients, but by their families and friends, and the alleged victims and their families and friends.

In further support of the bill, General Counsel Hewitt informed the Committee of the existence of compassion fatigue and how our staff is susceptible to being exposed to the affliction. She explained, "Compassion fatigue, also known as vicarious trauma, secondary traumatic stress, second hand shock, and secondary stress reaction, is a real and debilitating ailment that is common among government attorneys who practice criminal or family law." She continued by providing the Committee with information on a study conducted on Wisconsin State Public Defender Attorneys, which defines the phenomenon as the cumulative physical, emotional, and psychological effects resulting from continual exposure to others' traumatic experiences when working in a helping capacity. Common symptoms include sleep disturbance, anxiety, intrusive thoughts, lethargy, isolation, irritability, and a sense of futility or pessimism about people.

At the conclusion of her testimony, the General Counsel submitted materials to the Committee from the Wisconsin Defenders, the American Bar Association, the Oregon Attorneys Assistance Program, and the Michigan Bar Journal that further support our argument.