

## County terminates Public Defender

By **Scott Brand**  
**The Evening News**

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Sault Ste. Marie, Mich. — “Whatever we do, the name of the game is to do it right and do it expediently,” said Chairman Scott Shackleton as Tuesday’s special meeting of the Chippewa County Board of Commissioners drew to a close. Shackleton uttered those words after the board had voted to terminate Chippewa County Public Defender Julie Beck, elevated Rob Stratton to the post of acting public defender and took a big step toward the possibility of eliminating the office altogether. Beck explained early this morning that her termination had nothing to do with her job performance and came because she pointed out that her office was severely understaffed. State and federal guidelines call for public defenders to handle no more than 150 felonies or 400 misdemeanors in a year with her most recent case load totaling more than 1,000 cases — including 500 felonies for just two attorneys.

“Can you adequately represent the clients without additional help?” said Beck of the question posed to her. “The answer is ‘no’ and any attorney going in will have the same problem. Ultimately, it doesn’t matter who is in the driver’s seat — the problem remains.” While the more famous analogy indicates the squeaky wheel gets the grease, Beck noted in her case that sometimes “they just get rid of the bearing.”

Beck indicated there was no severance package included with her termination and she will walk with only Monday and Tuesday’s earnings on her final paycheck, plus her vacation days.

Stratton will have the full powers of a department head, at least for the time being. The commission opted against advertising for a new public defender at least until it can come to a decision regarding the future of the office.

The vast majority of Michigan’s 83 counties do not have a public defender’s office, opting to contract those services out. The Chippewa County Board of Commissioners formed an Ad-Hoc Committee specifically designed to determine which avenue would be best — both from a service and a financial aspect — holding multiple meetings in recent weeks to address this issue.

A final decision on the future of the Chippewa County Public Defender’s Office likely will not be made until the full board has a chance to review any incoming proposals regarding these services.

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Kudos to this young woman for speaking out. Seems a shame she has to lose her job for doing so. I wouldn't want my freedom, or my children's freedom to be on the line with a lawyer who had that many other cases to worry about. Does anyone know if these numbers include the big drug and homicide cases that have been going on lately? Those have to take up weeks or even months of a lawyer's time. How's a lawyer supposed to handle 500 of them and accomplish anything but a guilty plea? Then again, maybe that's what the County Board wants. Does anyone know how many lawyers are employed at the prosecutor's office?

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This is truly injustice within our justice system!!!!

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Interesting that this article only gives the dismissed employees side of the story. Ask Judge Church who was the Public Defender for many years if this office should be able to do the job with the staffing they have. And, if I'm not mistaken, the prosecutors office prosecutes ALL cases not just those that use the public defender, so you would expect there to be more lawyers working there.

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