

## LETTER - Public defense system falls short

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Hudsonville —

The American criminal justice system is founded on the principle that every individual is equal under the law, no matter race, creed, gender or personal wealth. Unfortunately, we seem to have slowly lost our way here in Michigan, where a defendant's financial status now directly impacts the quality of his legal representation.

A new report by the leading national resource on public defense, the National Legal Aid and Defender Association, chronicles an in-depth, year-long study of the public defender system in 10 Michigan counties, including Ottawa. A Michigan advisory group oversaw the selection of counties, and national experts were involved in on-the-ground evaluation. What they found was a system that puts a premium on speed at the expense of an adequate defense. The consequences are devastating for each and every one of us. Not only does the lack of adequate legal representation put those less fortunate at risk of false imprisonment but it imposes a serious financial toll on our communities.

Taxpayers are forced to pay for longer incarcerations due to sentencing errors, a bogged down appeals system, and sometimes, the incarceration of innocent men and women. Wrongful conviction lawsuits in other parts of the state have cost millions. Of course that is in addition to the financial, emotional and spiritual toll shouldered by our families when mom or dad is sent to prison because basic, constitutional protections were ignored.

By taking simple, common-sense steps to reform our public defense system, we can not only take a bite out of the billions Michigan spends annually on corrections but we can ensure every one of our family members, friends and neighbors receives equal protection under the law. We can literally afford to do no less.

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