

THE EVENING NEWS

SAULT STE. MARIE, MICH.

County public defenders are needed

To the Editor:

The Evening News reported that the Chippewa County Board of Commissioners has dismissed the county's public defender and is moving toward eliminating the office. That should alarm county residents concerned about fairness, public safety and constitutional rights,

The Sixth Amendment to the Constitution of the United States grants every resident accused of a crime the right to an effective public defense, even if that resident cannot afford an attorney. But now Chippewa County has just one attorney to handle a caseload that already far exceeded national standards for the two attorneys in the office.

Imagine your daughter was accused of a serious crime. Would you want her to be represented by an attorney with so little time to meet with her or adequately investigate the facts? Do Chippewa County families want to risk having innocent individuals convicted, for lack of defense resources, while the real perpetrators go free to commit more crimes?

Michigan's public defense system is one of the worst in the country. In 2008, a study found that not one of 10 counties examined, including Chippewa, met minimum national standards. These standards include caps on caseloads, so attorneys actually have the time and resources to adequately represent their clients.

The Michigan legislature will be considering proposals to change how public defense services are provided in this state. We are only one of seven states that have shifted the entire cost of public defense onto the counties. We hope you will urge the Chippewa County Commission to reconsider its decision to lay off one of its two public defenders, to work with that office to improve services and to join the movement for reform.

**Laura Sager, Executive Director
Michigan Campaign for Justice**

HOW TO SUBMIT

The Evening News encourages readers to express their views. Letters of community interest will be published on the opinion page. Letters should be as short as possible and may be edited for length and context. Letters that are potentially libelous or slanderous will not be printed. Letters must include names and hometowns. Telephone numbers also must be included for verification only. Names can be withheld only in extraordinary circumstances.