



Public Defender Job Satisfaction Survey Results

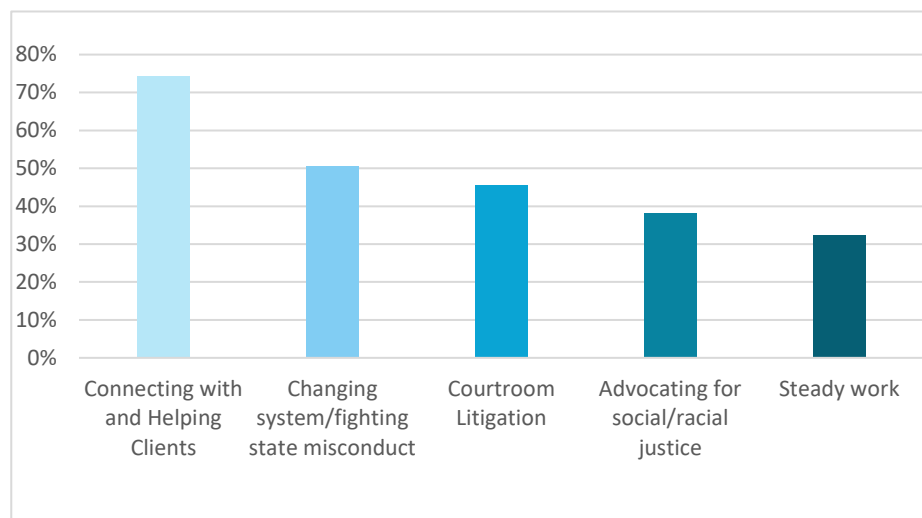
Background

Washington has been experiencing a public defense shortage compounded by many attorneys leaving the profession and a decrease in new attorneys applying for public defense positions. In 2023, the Office of Public Defense (OPD), attempted to understand the situation through a statewide survey on public defender job satisfaction and 491 attorneys responded to the survey.

Who becomes a public defender?

Survey results showed that common reasons for entering public defense include:

- 1) Achieving fulfillment with connecting and helping clients
- 2) Being part of changing the system
- 3) Enjoying courtroom litigation
- 4) Advocating for social and racial justice
- 5) Steady work



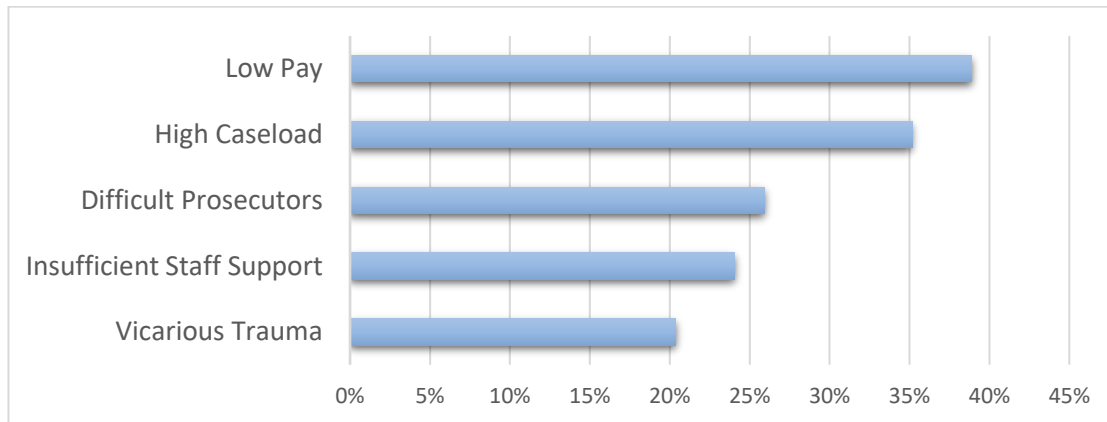
What conditions can improve job satisfaction?

Survey results indicate the highest levels of job satisfaction occur when:

1. Attorneys were a part of a public defense office;
2. Attorneys dedicated a higher percentage of their work to public defense, as opposed to splitting their time among practice areas, and;
3. Attorneys were at the beginning or end of their careers, with a notable slump observed between six and ten years of practice.
4. However, geographic region does not seem to have much effect on job satisfaction.

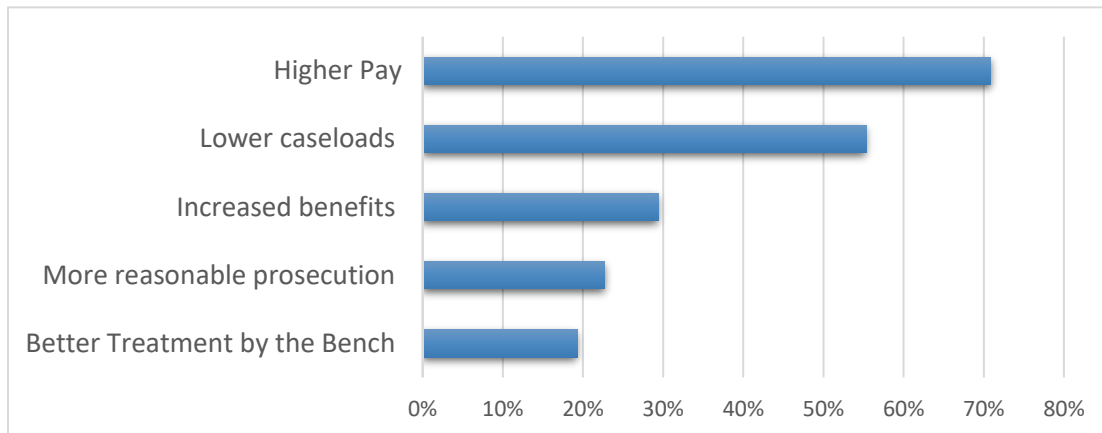
What factors lead to attorneys leaving the profession?

When asked why they left the profession, the most common responses given by former public defenders are:



What factors would keep public defenders in the profession?

When asked what would encourage public defenders to stay or entice them to return to public defense, the most common responses are:



Conclusion

Multiple factors affect public defender job satisfaction and retention. Public defenders generally enter the profession with a sense of mission and strong motivation. However, high caseloads and low pay relative to other legal practices, and low appreciation of their efforts, along with being unable to balance the demands of the practice with their personal lives, are driving defenders away from the profession. Burnout most often occurs between the sixth and tenth year of a public defender's career. Prior to this career timing, a local jurisdiction can take steps to improve career satisfaction and avoid losing a crucial work force. This includes increasing pay, reducing caseloads, and building some foundation of camaraderie amongst its public defense bar.