

Senator Rotundo, Representative Sachs, and members of the Committee on Appropriations and Financial Affairs; Senator Carney, Representative Moonen, and members of the Judiciary Committee, my name is Rhonda Ouellette. I have completed this testimony on my own time in support of LD 258, the biennial budget.

I have been with the Judicial Branch for ten years. I work in the York County Superior Court in the criminal division. The past 3 years have been extremely stressful and has taken a toll on all employees. The past year in particular has hit the branch hard. We have not been fully staffed, as employees we are constantly "putting out fires", only able to handle emergencies and not get work done as we would normally. It does not seem we will be able to get back to normal, maybe this is the new normal. The Judicial Branch needs to increase wages. We are not able to recruit because the starting pay is too low, we are not able to retain employees because the increases are minimal but the work is overwhelming. The Judicial Branch needs to evolve and start pay at a higher rate, create opportunities for all employees to grow and evolve rather than stay in a stagnant environment. Create realistic training opportunities that do not overwhelm the current employees trying to do their job as well as train. Cases have become more complex and more severe over the years as has scheduling and docketing and reporting requirements. The Judicial Branch needs to change and evolve with technology and recruiting and retaining quality employees.

I am attaching a picture of the docketing on my desk. I barely have room or time to sit at my desk and docket. I have courtroom responsibilities as well as training three new employees. We need more positions. As you can see, files are separated, this is to determine which ones have the highest priority. Sadly, it is weeks before I can get to the lower priority cases. The added stress of the Court Appointed Attorneys have also added to the work backlog. We used to pick an attorney from the list easily, if there was a conflict or needed to withdraw we were able to find another easily. Now when we only have one qualified attorney rostered, it is very challenging if we need to find another one. We are constantly receiving phone calls and written letters from defendants and their families, wanting more action on their cases. The courts need more resources.

In 2020 we started having court via Zoom. We have continued as we have a marshal shortage, not enough room for allowing more personal space as well as convenience and cost savings for all parties. I went from completing paperwork with minimal computer work in the courtroom to holding court with 3 keyboards and terminals in front of me while I completed paperwork. Instead of relying on the marshals to handle any interruptions it is now falling on me. I have to determine who was not muted, tell people they can not interrupt court proceedings, they can not swear, who needed to be told to remove their hat, to stop smoking, not eat, put on clothing, not drive a car. Set up breakout rooms and move people in and out of them, receive chats from people in the hearing, as well as from co-workers. It has become extremely stressful and intimidating. Training a new clerk in the courtroom is not easy, it is time consuming. In all of my years I have never seen so many co-workers break down in tears. We desperately need the time off but we come back in to piles and piles of work. I can not stress this enough the courts need more qualified, appropriately compensated employees.

I thank you for hearing from me today as I request your support for LD 258, the biennial budget.

Sincerely,

Rhonda Ouellette
Kennebunk, Maine

