

CONSTITUTIONAL CRISIS IN COOK COUNTY

“These lawyers have excessive caseloads and no matter how dedicated and conscientious they are, they cannot furnish the kind of competent and diligent representation required by the Illinois Rules of Professional Conduct.” Restraining Excessive Defender Caseloads: The ABA Ethics Committee Requires Action, *The Champion*, December, 2006.

This is the conclusion of national commentators who assessed the current caseloads in the Cook County Public Defenders Office.

The 480 lawyers who work for the Cook County Public Defenders Office handle 370,000 criminal cases each year. That number is not a typo.

These 370,000 cases are litigated on a threadbare budget- Cook County provides the Public Defenders Office a paltry \$132 per criminal case to defend the poor and working poor in this county.

To any rational person, these numbers mean that the Cook County Public Defenders Office is dramatically understaffed and woefully underfunded.

In the face of this looming crisis, Cook County Board President Todd Stroger unilaterally plans on slashing the Public Defender budget, gutting the attorney staff by 30%, and reducing salaries for the remaining staff by 25%. This plan is scheduled to take effect March 5th.

The legal community should be aware of this crisis, should speak out against these cuts, and should support a fully operational Public Defenders Office. The fundamental guarantees of the 6th Amendment are at stake. Whether we live up to this constitutional promise reflects on us all.

For more information, visit www.cookcountypd.org.

The Cook County Public Defender Association