

Written Testimony Submitted for the House Appropriations Committee
Testimony of Todd Oppenheim, member, AFSCME Maryland
HB 260 – AN ACT concerning State Personnel – Collective Bargaining – Supervisory Employees
January 26th, 2024

SUPPORT

Dear Chair Barnes, Vice-Chair Chang, and Members of the Appropriations Committee:

Contrary to public opinion, noble jobs do exist in the legal profession. It's hard to beat the work that we do as public defenders though. We serve our state and local communities by functioning as the backbone of the criminal justice system. Judges, prosecutors, and court staff rely on us every day. So do our clients. We represent individuals who cannot afford to pay for an attorney and are facing criminal charges. Our clients are voiceless and marginalized. They face serious consequences. I've been a Public Defender for my entire 20-year legal career. My job can be meaningful, important, impactful, stress inducing, frustrating or draining at any given time. I've experienced this gambit at every level in the Baltimore City office of our agency from neophyte bail review attorney at Central Booking up through trying murder cases in circuit court and currently supervising a team of attorneys and staff. Now, as a leader and supervisor of other employees, I not only feel the impact of the realities of my own clients, tasks, and responsibilities, I'm intimately connected to those of my team. Supervisors are right there on the front lines with line attorneys and staff.

In the OPD, supervisors have had to help our teams endure increased caseloads, limited resources, and a lack of new hire reinforcements. Yet we have no formal direct input with upper-level management on such important issues. Working as a Public Defender seems less like a career and more of a stepping stone job as conditions worsen. Morale is down and folks on the ground seem disconnected from management. Our attorneys and staff recently unionized and achieved collective bargaining, which has given them a seat at the table with management. As a supervisor, I am caught in the middle, wanting to bridge the gap between those that I supervise and those above me. I want the protections and negotiating power that collective bargaining can provide so that I can more effectively work with my team on the ground while pushing the administration to fight for those of us in the trenches. We've already seen small gains from the fully unionized efforts of those that I supervise. Thus, now is the time to give folks on my level the same rights.

Collective bargaining for supervisors will undoubtedly give us a chance at improving our working conditions within the OPD, but the importance of that should not be lost on who, ultimately, will reap the rewards of those changes- our clients. This effort is about improving the OPD for both those who work here and the individuals we represent.

Todd Oppenheim
Supervising Attorney
OPD, Baltimore City, Felony Trial Division