

Written Testimony Submitted for the Senate Finance Committee
Emily Gillis, member, Maryland Defenders Union, AFSCME Local 423
SB 255 - State Personnel Management System - Office of the Public Defender – Placement and Collective Bargaining
Sponsor: Senator Pam Beidle
Finance Committee, Thursday, February 10, 2022

SUPPORT

Dear Chair Kelley, Vice-Chair Feldman, and Members of the Finance Committee:

My name is Emily Gillis and I've been an Assistant Public Defender since 2018. I work in Cecil County, one of 5 counties in District 3, OPD's largest District by several counties, and Cecil happens to handle more than 50% of the cases for my district.

Since I started with OPD I have seen my caseload increase every day. In 2019, I was specifically assigned over 1800 cases. These do not include the cases that I handled during bail reviews in both District and Circuit Court, fugitive hearings, cases I covered for other attorneys because they were out or unavailable, or on the days when I helped colleagues who had unmanageable dockets. I have had to address issues with my own mental health due to the overwhelming and seemingly never ending increase in cases.

Every day that I wake up, I struggle to make it through the day without feeling overwhelmed or hopeless. I am not merely someone's legal representative, but I'm also often their therapist or social worker. In these roles, I'm often taking on difficult and emotional conversations with my clients and their family members at the hardest point in their lives. This job has often made me choose between taking a break to concentrate on my own mental health, or try and keep up with my docket. This is an impossible balance no one should have to deal with.

Every single day, I put my clients first. I must because I'm already in a position where I have to triage my cases to see who deserves more of my attention. I sit every day weighing one person's freedom versus another's because there is not enough time in the day and not enough days in a week or a year for me to put in the time I would like for every single client. I believe I give good representation, but our clients deserve the best representation, and that can only happen when the staff of OPD have a way to advocate for themselves and the work.

Collective bargaining for me would be a godsend. With collective bargaining I would no longer have to pick which clients I can spare five more minutes for on their case, and which ones I am forced to meet at the last minute. Collective bargaining would mean that I wouldn't have to selfishly pick my mental health over preparing a little longer on case. How would this be possible? Collective bargaining would allow myself and every other attorney, who often wear many different hats in this agency, to have a seat at the table and discuss reasonable caseloads so each client is given the time and energy they deserve.

I urge you to vote YES on SB 255, and extend collective bargaining to employees at the Office of the Public Defender.

Emily Gillis
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Cecil County