

**Written Testimony Submitted for the Senate Finance Committee**  
**Julia Burke and Drew Northrup, members, Maryland Defenders Union, AFSCME Local 423**  
**SB255 - State Personnel Management System - Office of the Public Defender – Placement and Collective Bargaining**

**Sponsors:** Senators Beidle, Benson, Carter, Feldman, Hettleman, Klausmeier, Kramer, Waldstreicher, and Smith  
**Senate Finance Committee, Thursday, February 10, 2022**

**SUPPORT**

Dear Senators:

My name is Julia Burke, and I am an Assistant Public Defender at the Maryland Office of the Public Defender, and I am a proud member of the Maryland Defenders Union (MDU). Along with my colleague Drew Northrup, an Assistant Public Defender and MDU member, I write in support of SB 255 and I want to share why collective bargaining is beneficial and necessary for public defenders and all Marylanders.

Prior to working at the Maryland Office of the Public Defender, I was a public defender in New York City with the Legal Aid Society and the Office of the Appellate Defender. Both of these offices are unionized with the United Auto Workers as the Association of Legal Aid Attorneys - Local 2325. Drew experienced collective bargaining rights in two public defenders offices - in Cook County, Illinois under AFSCME Local 3315, and in Minnesota, under Teamsters Local 320. Collectively, we have nearly twenty years of experience as unionized public defenders.

Throughout our time as unionized public defenders, we have seen the benefits of collective bargaining on the quality of representation of our clients, especially when we bargained for reasonable caseloads, higher pay, and safe working conditions.

Reasonable caseloads for attorneys, social workers, and staff have tangible, life-changing benefits for our clients. As unionized public defenders with reasonable caseloads, we spent more time on each client's case. We got to know our clients and their unique circumstances better, and were better able to advocate for them. Caseload limits increased our advocacy and productivity, and produced better outcomes for all parties.

Higher pay also helps to attract and retain the most talented attorneys, social workers, and staff. Retention of employees leads to continuity of representation, meaning that clients do not have the additional stress of a new, unfamiliar legal team as they're navigating their court case. This also naturally increases court efficiency by reducing delays for personnel changes. But most of all, it means our clients have the same advocacy team by their side throughout their case.

Finally, collective bargaining benefits public defenders by allowing us to negotiate the safest possible working conditions during the ongoing pandemic. Unlike other state employees who regularly enter prisons, jails, and courts, our members are unable to bargain for hazard pay or proper protective gear. As a public defender in New York City in the early days of the pandemic, I benefited from flexible workplace accommodations which allowed me to keep myself healthy so I could keep showing up for my clients remotely and with proper protective gear in-person.

We have never seen our unionized public defender offices do anything detrimental to our clients, and often, our unions were integral to advancing justice for our clients even outside the courtroom.

Our members deserve the same bargaining rights as other unionized workers in Maryland, but moreover, the people of Maryland deserve public defenders who can collectively bargain for themselves.

Maryland should join 19 other states across the country with unionized public defenders in advancing racial, economic, and social justice for our clients. We urge the Senate Finance Committee to submit a favorable report on SB 255.

Respectfully submitted,

Julia Burke

Assistant Public Defender

AFSCME Local 423

Former member of UAW-ALAA 2325 (NY)

Drew Northrup

Assistant Public Defender

AFSCME Local 423

Former member of AFSCME Local 3315 (IL)

Former member of Teamsters Local 320 (MN)