

Proof We Can Get Things Done Together

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Last week, the Joint Finance Committee voted unanimously to raise the pay of public defenders and district attorneys. This step can help restore confidence in the Legislature's ability to get the people's work accomplished.

MADISON - In an environment where politics can be so disagreeable, it is nice to report something good coming out of the Capitol. Last week, taking a break from the vitriol to which we have become all-too accustomed, members of the Legislature came to a bipartisan agreement.

The state of Wisconsin has faced a crisis brewing in our justice system for years. The old adage states "the wheels of justice turn slowly," and in the past couple years it seems to have come to a near stop.

People accused of offenses are guaranteed a speedy trial by our Constitution. Victims also deserve to have cases resolved in a timely manner. Yet our system has become so broken that justice has become unreliable. With challenges faced by law enforcement and our courts, neither victims nor the accused always see justice served.

In simple terms: justice should be fair and timely. It's the state's responsibility to ensure this, and yet in past years the investment just hasn't been there. The pay available for assistant district attorneys (DAs) and public defenders has not been competitive enough to keep positions filled. Understaffed and overworked, elected DAs have resigned when it became impossible to keep up with the caseload.

Members of both parties in the Legislature have been concerned about this issue, and Governor Evers and the Joint Finance Committee (JFC) have taken steps to fix it. After years of falling behind in pay equity for assistant DAs and public defenders, the JFC voted to raise pay for public defenders, assistant DAs and elected DAs alike.



Assistant DAs and public defenders would receive \$8.76 more per hour, increasing starting salaries from \$56,659 per year to \$74,880. The provisions also exempt current assistant DAs and public defenders from current maximum salary levels so they can qualify for deserved increases in pay.

We've also seen elected DAs take a demotion to deputy DA to take advantage of better pay. These budget provisions ensure DAs are being paid in keeping with the position of leadership they hold.

In the case that a public defender is not available, the court system engages private attorneys. Under these budget provisions, compensation for private attorneys needed for those cases will also be raised to better incentivize attorneys to step in when needed.

Funding is included for some much-needed positions in Kenosha and Sauk Counties, currently funded through pandemic funds that are slated to expire. These two counties often take on cases for offenders who are not considered local to them, severely overtaxing their courts. These provisions increase funding to pay for the additional circuit court branches created in the last budget. The budget includes funding to help the Supreme Court update and maintain aging cybersecurity software.

For both the accused and the victim of a crime, the Constitution guarantees the right to a fair trial. It is our duty to make sure everything is in place so justice is upheld in a fair and timely manner.



Legislators like to imagine they are being good stewards of the public's money when they reduce spending, but this is often the opposite of the truth. In reality, when we don't keep up with costs, it compounds problems and cuts people off from access to services guaranteed to them by our government. The longer we put it off, the more costly it becomes, putting us in a position where we are falling ever more behind.

By paying legal professionals in public service a fair and competitive wage, we will restore trust in our justice system. And it happened in the Legislature's Joint Finance Committee, which agreed unanimously to move Governor Evers' proposal forward.

If we can work towards more bipartisan agreements on the important issues facing our state, we could even start to restore faith and trust in our legislature. Isn't that a great idea?

Senator Smith represents District 31 in the Wisconsin State Senate. The 31st Senate District includes all of Buffalo, Pepin and Trempealeau counties and portions of Pierce, Dunn, Eau Claire, Jackson and St. Croix counties.

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