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EDITOR'S PICK | FEATURED

Social workers having 'significant impact' on public defense in Utah County

By Connor Richards Daily Herald
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Matt Frank Hoover, right, speaks with Tom Means, a defense attorney, during Hoover's initial appearance in the 4th D Court on Monday, Jan. 28, 2019, in Provo.

Evan Cobb, Daily Herald

Utah County social workers have been having a "significant impact" on criminal defense for residents who can't afford to hire legal counsel.

That's according to the Utah County Public Defender Association, which provides "effective and efficient representation to those charged with crimes in Utah County."

During a quarterly budget presentation before the Utah County Commission on Wednesday, Benjamin Young, who was hired in June 2020 as financial manager of the county public defender association, said the county recently approved letting social workers assist public defenders with their caseloads, which he said ended up being a "big success story."

"And those social workers have been having a significant impact on the amount of work that the attorneys can do," Young told the commission. "Because it's taken off of their plate all of the (responsibilities like) taking a client to get services, to get them into programs, following up on them. ... (It has) taken that off of the attorney's plate where the social worker can focus on that, which lets each of the attorneys handle more cases."

For years, public defenders in Utah County have been burdened by heavy caseloads, long work hours and staffing levels at "full capacity."

Earlier this year, after an increase in the number of cases assigned to the Utah County Public Defender Association in 2020, the Utah Indigent Defense Commission approved a grant to hire two additional Utah County public defenders for a one-year term.

In the first quarter of 2021, Utah County public defenders handled 1,052 criminal cases, equating to about 17,500 work hours, or 56.2 hours per attorney per week, according to Young, who noted that the goal is to stay under 60 hours.

"So, I mean, that's right there," he said. "That's at the funding level we want and with the appropriate number of attorneys."

The decreased workload is mainly thanks to the social workers, according to Young, who noted that "they're having a significant impact and it's a huge time-saver for them (the public defenders)."

The financial manager said he is working on preparing "quantifiable data" to demonstrate the impact the social workers have had on the public defender association.

"In the interim, I would just say that it's made a significant difference and it's really gotten us where we should be," he said.

According to a presentation on Wednesday, Utah County public defenders saw a decrease in drug cases and orders to show cause — where defendants are ordered to re-appear in court — in the first quarter of the year. At the same time, public defenders saw an increase in aggravated persons cases, which Young said require more time and resources to work on.

Young also noted that the public defender association is working with the Utah Division of Child and Family Services to get "special federal funding that's reserved for child welfare," funding that he said could be used to reimburse money spent by the county to provide public defense for parents and children in juvenile court.

"It's just another avenue that we're looking to expand every dollar that we get from Utah County to stretch it as far as possible. This would just expand those dollars a little bit further," he said.

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