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January 8, 2025

The Honorable Ken Weyler, Chairman
 Fiscal Committee of the General Court and

Her Excellency, Governor Kelly A. Ayotte
 and the Honorable Council

State House
 Concord, N.H. 03301

REQUESTED ACTION

Pursuant to RSA 604-A:1-b, Additional Funding, authorize the Judicial Council to receive an additional appropriation from funds not otherwise appropriated in the total amount of \$2,500,000, effective upon Fiscal Committee and Governor and Council approval, through June 30, 2025. **100% General Funds.**

Funding is to be budgeted in 02-07-07-070010-10910000 ASSIGNED COUNSEL as follows:

Class/Expense	Class Title	Current Budget	Change	Revised Budget
108/500751	Provider Payments Legal Services	\$3,081,292	\$2,500,000	\$5,581,292

EXPLANATION

This account funds the work of assigned counsel for both indigent criminal defendants and accused parents in abuse and neglect cases. The Judicial Council utilizes assigned counsel when the Public Defender has a conflict in a case and there is no Contract Counsel willing to take the case. As forecast, this amount has increased with the decline in attorneys who provide legal services through a contract with the Judicial Council, as well as the increased reimbursement rates set for assigned counsel. Without additional funding, the Judicial Council will be unable to pay the court-approved invoices for these services.

Pursuant to the State's statutory order of appointment, all indigent criminal defense cases are sent directly to the Public Defender program. The Public Defender reviews each case, and if an ethical conflict exists, the case is then assigned to a contract attorney. The majority of indigent criminal defense cases remain with the Public Defender. Contract attorneys are paid a flat fee and serve as the back-up to the Public Defender. If contract counsel is unavailable or if the charged conduct is

a homicide that the Public Defender has conflicted out of, assigned counsel is then appointed to the case. The assigned counsel system is based on an hourly rate of payment, with a structure of fee caps in place through court rules. Unpredictable factors, such as the number of homicides and other major crimes in a fiscal year, also impact the assigned counsel expense.

This statutory order of appointment is set forth in RSA 604-A:2. It provides that “[w]henver the court makes an appointment under paragraph I, the appointment shall be made as follows: first, appointment of the public defender program under RSA 604-B if that office is available; second, in the event the public defender program is not available, appointment of a contract attorney under RSA 604-A:2-b if such an attorney is available; and third, in the event that neither the public defender program nor a contract attorney is available, the appointment of any qualified attorney under paragraph I.”

RSA 604-A:1-a provides that “[i]n cases involving a neglected or abused child, when an expressed interest attorney is appointed for the child as provided in RSA 169-C:10, the cost of such appointment shall be paid from funds appropriated for indigent defense in this chapter.” This section also provides that “[i]n cases involving a neglected or abused child, when an attorney is appointed to represent a parent determined to be indigent pursuant to RSA 169-C:10, II, at the preliminary hearing or a hearing pursuant to RSA 169-C:6-a, III, whichever occurs earlier, the cost of such appointment, including counsel and investigative, expert, or other services and expenses, shall be paid from funds appropriated for indigent defense pursuant to this chapter. Counsel shall petition the court for investigative, expert, or other services necessary to provide adequate representation.”

RSA 604-A:1-b provides that “[i]n the event that expenditures for indigent defense by the Judicial Council are greater than amounts appropriated in the operating budget, the Judicial Council may request, with prior approval of the Fiscal Committee of the General Court, that the Governor and Council authorize additional funding. For funds requested and approved, the Governor is authorized to draw a warrant from any money in the treasury not otherwise appropriated.”

Total FY24 expenditures for this line were \$4,678,708. The FY25 operating budget for this line is \$3,080,000.00. As of January 7, 2025, year-to-date expenditures for this line were \$2,592,109.47 (i.e., approximately 84% of the budget).

The need to appoint assigned counsel has grown significantly since the pandemic. This has been driven in large part due to the major decline in attorneys who are willing to take a contract to provide indigent defense services.

The Supreme Court also approved a revision to the court rule that governs counsel fees and expenses in indigent criminal cases, increasing the maximum fee in criminal cases, increasing the hourly rate for attorneys, and authorizing billing for travel time. (Sup. Ct. R. 47). The base rate for most criminal cases, which had been set at \$60.00 per hour in 1992, increased to \$90.00 per hour 2022 and then to \$125 an hour on January 1, 2025.

The costs for representation in abuse and neglect cases are similarly affected by a change in the Supreme Court rule that sets the compensation rate in these cases. Effective October 1, 2022, the

rate for representation in non-criminal indigent cases, including abuse and neglect cases, increased from \$60.00 to \$90.00 per hour, and then to \$125 on January 1, 2025 (Sup. Ct. R. 48).

In short, the Judicial Council pays assigned counsel for more cases, and the rate payable to assigned counsel has increased. However, the budget for assigned counsel has remained the same. Additionally, the anticipated costs for representation in homicides and the YDC cases continue to have a significant impact on the assigned counsel budget.

The funds currently available in account 02-07-07-070010-10910000 are insufficient to pay the court-approved invoices expected to arrive between now and the end of the current fiscal year. Based on the monthly average of expenditures year to date, the effective date of the rule change) the Judicial Council anticipates that the account will require the addition of at least \$2,500,000 to meet the anticipated expenditures in this line through June 30, 2025.

This agency will remain at your service to provide any requested information concerning the critical importance of this additional funding to the orderly administration of justice.

Thank you for your consideration.

Respectfully Submitted,

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Jay Buckey".

Jay M. Buckey
Executive Director