



# TEAMSTERS LOCAL UNION 117

*Affiliated with the International Brotherhood of Teamsters*

General Public and Private Sector Employees and Special Services Employees in King and Pierce Counties and Employees of the State of Washington

July 31, 2018

## Via Email Only

Dear Members of the Public Defense Advisory Board, County Executive Constantine, and King County Councilmembers:

Department of Public Defense (DPD) employees represented by SEIU 925 and Teamsters 117 recognize that DPD is currently at a crossroads as the process begins to choose our next Director. It is with that in mind that we are deeply concerned about the independence of the position and ensuring the Director's ongoing ability to advocate for equity and social justice issues that are in line with our work.

When King County Ordinance 17678 was written, it gave particular emphasis to independence of the Director and a need for DPD to engage in social justice issues. Of note, Section 1, Findings, reads:

J. The county intends to maintain the high quality of public defense services that public defense attorneys and staff have delivered and to which King County has long been committed, by promoting independence from political influence, a quality work force and operational efficiency in the provision of public defense services.

The Ordinance goes on to outline the duties of both the Department and the Director as "Fostering and promoting system improvements, efficiencies, access to justice and equity in the criminal justice system." King County's DPD website describes DPD's mission as:

"...[provide] zealous, client-centered criminal defense, juvenile defense, family defense and more to indigent people in King County and Seattle...DPD employees take great pride in their work and are deeply committed to public defense and the rights of those caught up in the criminal justice system."

On creating the new Department, the DPD website states "...the County Council ensured the Department was independent from political influence. The Director – or Public Defender – is appointed to four-year terms and can be dismissed only for cause," stressing the importance that the position not be influenced by competing political standpoints. The DPD website goes on to state, "Of particular note is that both the charter amendment and the Council's ordinance implementing that charter underscore the importance of equity and social justice in the delivery of public defense services...Today, the department plays an active role in King County government and in the broader community, advocating for programs and policy reforms that address racial disproportionality in the criminal justice system, provide alternatives to incarceration, address the collateral consequences of justice involvement and promote a fairer and more just system for the criminally accused."

DPD Board, Executive Constantine,  
and King County Councilmembers  
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DPD employees overwhelmingly voted in a recent union survey both that we were disappointed with our previous Director's lack of independence and visibility on equity and social justice issues, and that going forward we expect the Public Defender to engage in equity and social justice policy work that aligns with DPD's vision and values. 74% of the union members who responded said that they believed DPD's position within King County government allows for the DPD Director to be an effective leader on broader issues such as race, equity, and social justice. Employees who work at DPD do so in large part because of our commitment to racial, socioeconomic, and social justice issues. We do so because we have a passion for the community and for the clients we serve. We work tirelessly to defend the Constitution and promote equality. We cannot do those things in any meaningful way if DPD is confined to aligning itself with the policies of the Executive's Office or the Council that may be counter to the needs of our clients.

When public defense in King County was taken into the County and DPD was formed, the County acknowledged the vital work we do. Part of what is so vital about our work is that we are some of the few voices available to our indigent clients. Few other professional stakeholders are better equipped to speak to our clients' unique traumas, their experiences in the criminal justice system, their desired outcomes, and their rights than public defense. Just as the elected Prosecutor has become a spokesperson for crime victims and law enforcement, it is crucial that the Public Defender have an equally strong voice in ensuring that our clients' rights and dignity are respected. We are an authentic voice to people who are otherwise so often treated as invisible.

A strong, independent Public Defender can be a great asset to the Executive's Office and to the Council. An independent Public Defender can offer counter viewpoints and create a more robust and diverse discussion of issues, which can only lead to the best possible policy outcomes. An independent Public Defender can also lend credibility to the decisions the Executive and Council make; knowing that all stakeholders have participated in decision-making assures the County that a broader voice of the community have been represented. If the Public Defender is only allowed to echo the Executive and Council's positions, the opportunity for growth is stifled. King County will no longer be the vibrant model for other communities across the nation that it has been and strives to be.

With this in mind, we urge you to ensure the independence and social justice focus of the Public Defender during the Director selection process. While the occasional conflicts in perspective may be, at times, uncomfortable, we sincerely believe that it is to the entire County's benefit to make sure these discussions are had, that public defense has a seat at the table to influence policy and priorities going forward, and that the Public Defender is allowed to advocate for our clients as our commitment to social justice mandates. History has its eyes on this moment and the influence it will have on public defense and the County for years to come.

Sincerely,

Department of Public Defense  
Members of Teamsters 117 and SEIU 925