



Via email

February 2, 2024

To the Gazette Editorial Board:

The recent editorial "Public defenders aren't social workers" presents a limited view of the role of public defenders and their impact on our legal system and society. Fiscal responsibility is crucial, but understanding the broader implications of public defense is necessary to appreciate its true value.

People have a constitutional right to a sound legal defense. Social workers on public defense teams specialize in identifying the facts that make up a defense, usually at a lower cost than attorneys. Cutting corners on public defense risks unfair trials and wrongful convictions.

Moreover, a robust public defense system reduces overall system costs. Helping people navigate the practical aspects of getting to court, like having appropriate clothing and childcare, prevents case delays. Addressing the root causes of criminal behavior, such as mental health issues, reduces jail and prison sentences. In Kentucky, for example, for each \$1 spent on social workers, the state saved \$5.66 in incarceration costs. The Bronx saved \$160 million in incarceration costs over ten years using this model, without increasing recidivism. This approach is not only more humane, but more economically sound in the long run.

Ultimately, public defenders' costs are driven by law enforcement: more serious charges require more defense work, which is why Aurora's and Denver's courts are different from Colorado Springs'. Greater costs are incurred through arrest, jail detention, and prosecution than from public defenders, and these costs must be considered together.

The decision-makers in Aurora should know the facts. Independent studies have shown that systems that incorporate holistic services save taxpayers money, with no harm to public safety. These systems not only ensure the constitutional right to counsel but also contribute to a more just and efficient legal system, benefiting the community as a whole.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read 'L. James-Townes', is written over a light blue background.

Lori James-Townes
Executive Director