

Minnesota Board of Public Defense

Topic Selection Background Information

April 2025

Program Overview	The Minnesota Board of Public Defense is a Judicial Branch agency that provides public defense to certain individuals who cannot afford to obtain legal counsel. The board has identified five goals to support its mission and is responsible for appointing certain lead public defenders and approving standards for public defender offices, among other tasks. The board employs nearly 900 assistant public defenders and other professionals.
Evaluation Questions	What are current average caseloads for public defenders in Minnesota, and how do they compare to national standards? To what extent has the Minnesota Board of Public Defense met its goals? To what extent have board members provided effective leadership and carried out their responsibilities?
State Resources <i>High</i>	Board operations are primarily state funded. In Fiscal Year 2024, the board expended approximately \$153 million.
State Control <i>High</i>	The board and its responsibilities are established in law, as are the criteria that make an individual eligible to receive a public defender and the duties of certain lead public defenders.
Impact <i>High</i>	The board reports that it represents individuals in more than 140,000 cases annually. Those represented by public defenders cannot afford to pay for legal representation. Navigating the legal system without representation could have significant adverse effects on the defendants' case outcomes and lives.
Timeliness <i>Medium</i>	In 2022, an overwhelming majority of public defenders voted that they had no confidence in the leadership of the State Public Defender, and more than half of the public defenders who completed a union survey reported that working conditions hindered their ability to conduct timely investigations. At the same time, the board received a 55 percent increase in state funding between fiscal years 2022 and 2025, which may have helped to address some concerns.
Feasibility <i>High</i>	The topic could be evaluated using standard evaluation techniques, including data analysis, document reviews, interviews, and surveys.
Balance <i>High</i>	OLA last evaluated the public defender system in 2010.
Discussion	This could be a timely and useful topic. The questions posed for this evaluation would also give OLA an opportunity to assess the extent to which recommendations from its 2010 report were implemented.