

NEWS RELEASE

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Wyoming Lawyers Step Up *Public Defender Shortage Is Eased by Private Attorneys*

Cheyenne, WY – Approximately twenty attorneys from across the state of Wyoming and Colorado have volunteered to assist the Office of the Wyoming State Public Defender in representing needy defendants in Wyoming’s Sixth Judicial District, according to Judge Wendy M. Bartlett, Circuit Court judge for Campbell County.

“People charged with serious crimes have a constitutional right to an attorney, even if they cannot afford to retain one. We are grateful for the response by local and state bar association members,” she said. “We understand that attorneys across Wyoming are busy and in short supply, and we appreciate those who have volunteered their time and effort.”

According to Bartlett, the need for private counsel stems from notice by the Wyoming State Public Defender that the office in the Sixth Judicial District (comprised of Campbell, Crook and Weston counties) is severely understaffed and will soon deem itself “unavailable” to take misdemeanor cases. Bartlett said the public defenders requested a meeting earlier this month, explained the issue, and asked the court to appoint private counsel to represent indigent clients charged with misdemeanors, thereby enabling the public defender’s office to focus its efforts on representing defendants charged with more serious crimes.

“Wyoming law provides that when the public defenders are unavailable, the court must appoint private counsel to assist defendants charged with jailable offenses,” she said, explaining that a misdemeanor is a crime for which the maximum sentence is less than one year, while a felony is a crime for which the possible penalty is a year or more.

Following the meeting, the circuit court judges sought assistance initially from members of the Campbell County Bar Association. More recently, Bartlett said, the Wyoming State Bar asked for volunteers, resulting in offers of assistance from attorneys practicing throughout Wyoming and northern Colorado.

“The response has been outstanding,” Bartlett said. “By having private attorneys temporarily shoulder the burden of representing people charged with misdemeanors, we can guarantee that right while freeing the public defender’s staff to focus its efforts on representing defendants charged with more serious offenses,” she added. “The assistance of private counsel should enable the public defenders continue their mission while developing a long-term solution to what has been a chronic shortage of lawyers.”

Additional questions or requests for information should be addressed to Judge Paul Phillips of the Campbell County circuit court.

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