



January 27, 2023

Members of the Judiciary and Public Safety Committee:

On behalf of NAMI Minnesota, we are writing in support of SF 355. Public defenders are an essential part of our criminal legal system. People facing criminal charges who cannot afford their own attorney are often the most vulnerable people in our communities and too often face discrimination for their race, socioeconomic status, and disabilities.

We receive many calls on our helpline from people with loved ones in the court process. We often advocate that families communicate as much as possible with the public defender on the case to explain a person's mental illness and their history and circumstances. For people who do not have a connection to their families, the public defender can be the only person advocating for them in a confusing and intimidating system. This includes protecting a person's constitutional rights if they may be incompetent to stand trial or advocating for proven alternatives to incarceration like treatment courts.

Our public defenders have been stretched beyond their capacity for years. This has a negative impact on anyone who needs a public defender, but these issues are often compounded by a person's mental illness, making it difficult to keep track of important mail, times and dates for hearings or examinations, and following through with important matters on their case. We believe providing adequate support for public defenders is directly in line with NAMI's mission to champion justice, dignity, and respect for all people impacted by mental illnesses. Thank you for your time and for hearing this important bill.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Sue Abderholden".

Sue Abderholden, MPH
Executive Director

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Elliot Butay".

Elliot Butay
Criminal Justice Coordinator



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