



FY21 Budget Proposal

The Georgia Public Defender Council is respectfully requesting that it receive special consideration regarding the state's proposed budget reductions for fiscal year 2021. The proliferation of COVID-19 and the subsequent public health and judicial emergencies are unprecedented world-historical events that have placed exigent demands on the state government and legal system undergirding civil society.

Actions taken by Georgia's leaders have saved lives and averted economic free-fall. The crucial tasks for the first and second quarters of the fiscal year 2021 will involve restoring the economy to its pre-COVID prosperity and supporting Georgians as they return to public life and the institutions that allow them to thrive.

It is the position of GPDC that the proposed FY21 budget reduction would serve to arrest this recovery and hinder the agency's ability to provide essential and statutorily-mandated legal services during a period when the public need and demand for them will skyrocket. In consideration of this, and the below-enumerated points, GPDC respectfully requests that its slated 14 percent reduction be negated.

FY21, COVID-19 and the Demand for Public Defender Services

GPDC and its attorneys represent indigent citizens, a group that is disproportionately impacted by economic fluctuations and changes to public services. The observed rise in unemployment has expanded the number of those qualifying for indigent status, concomitantly increasing the agency's client base.

The fiscal and social consequences of COVID-19 and its lingering stresses will lead to a substantial increase in demand for GPDC attorneys as newly indigent persons come into contact with the legal system. In a given year, Public Defenders provide representation to defendants in 80 to 90 percent of all criminal cases in the state. In brief:

- COVID-19 and the recovery will create an increase in indigent defenders that GPDC *must* represent, in addition to its current clients
- Courts are facing a deluge of backlogged case that will create an unprecedented surge in demand for legal services, further stressing finite personnel and material resources
- Public defenders will require support to adapt to changes in serving clients, performing investigations in the field, participating in proceedings, and maintaining staff contact during quarantine and social distancing
- GPDC's history of reductions over the years has stressed limited resources that will be further stressed by increased demand, a statewide case backlog, changes to practices in FY21
- Impacts to trial-level services has the potential to create more appeals and costly litigation over time, placing additional demands on the legal system and state funds



The Client-Focused Service Model

GPDC is currently in the process of moving to an even more client-focused service model that provides representation while also connecting clients with revenue-neutral pro-social services to break cycles of court involvement (without additional costs to the state). The agency is developing localized continuums of care, wherein qualifying clients are referred to public and vetted non-profit organizations that can provide education assistance, housing assistance, and job readiness, training, and placement, amongst other services.

The agency's goal is to both represent our clients in court, and to address the underlying factors precipitating court involvement. Doing so will further ensure these persons will not require our legal services in the future. Communities will benefit from decreased recidivism, fewer families separated by incarceration, and an expanded employment-ready workforce. The state will benefit from fewer individuals utilizing public services.

In support of this service model, GPDC has already made considerable progress in realigning parts of its organizational structure, finding new efficiencies, and consolidating units and positions. This includes:

- Realigning and expanding the scope of training to include professional development to expand GPDC employee skillsets and create a more versatile workforce
- Realigning the internal Information Technology division to accelerate the agency's capacity for remote work, enabling a more mobile and responsive workforce, and over the long-term, reducing the need for costly office space.
- Streamlined and consolidated multiple positions to eliminate redundancies while combining complementary job duties/responsibilities to maximize efficiency and personnel resources
- Developed a revised and expanded grants protocol and grants team to proactively seek out and apply for available funds, both at the state and county level
- Hiring a performance manager to cases, statistics and other data points throughout the agency to discover new opportunities for efficiency, to enable leaders to practice data-based decision making in allocating resources, and to hold employees accountable for their work
- Hiring a dedicated administrator to handle agency-wide administrative matters (those outside either state-level services or county-level services) and manage GPDC Foundation to raise funds in support of agency operations
- Revitalizing the GPDC Foundation with the eventual goal of utilizing foundation funds to augment 10 percent of GPDC's annual budget
- Partnering with Georgia law schools to allow third-year students and recent graduates to provide limited services to clients at no cost to the state

FY21 & GPDC

GPDC is respectfully requesting that the above be considered while determining its budget. We will continue to be a good-faith partner in this process, and we would be remiss if we did not brief you on the unique factors, challenges, and legal considerations pertaining to the agency. Per the instructions from OPB, please find GPDC's outline for the proposed reduction enclosed with this document. We sincerely appreciate your support and consideration.