

It's been said a guilty man who is rich has a better chance of being acquitted in criminal court than does an innocent man who is poor. But somehow, the scales of justice need to be balanced. The U.S. Constitution guarantees every person arrested and criminally charged has the right to an attorney, and, if they cannot afford an attorney one will be appointed for them. We have no quarrel with that.

The Erie County Public Defender's office is the place that provides an attorney for people facing criminal charges who can't afford to hire a lawyer on their own. And taxpayers pay the bill for maintaining the office. We have no quarrel with that, either.

The office is asking for more money from Erie County commissioners, its primary funding source. In recent years it has received about \$1 million annually in taxpayer money from the commissioners, which is used primarily to pay the salaries of its seven attorneys who represent the indigent.

Jeff Whitacre, the lead public defender in Erie County, contends legal cases have grown more complex in the last two decades, as have the underpinnings of social circumstances, mental health conditions, addictions and poverty as causes leading to criminal cases.

As we grow as a society and learn more about ourselves, about the causes of crime and the ways to prevent it, and as prosecutors take a deeper look at different way to prosecute nonviolent and violent crime, we're hopeful that one day the cost of criminal justice will shift and the level of crime will decrease.

In the meantime, however, people accused of crime are guaranteed to the right to competent legal defense counsel and Whitacre's request for increased funding must be carefully reviewed and must be granted as it can be in order to protect the innocent and preserve the integrity of our court system.

"We need experienced attorneys," Whitaker said. Lives are in the balance. Families are in the balance. Now more than ever, experience matters."

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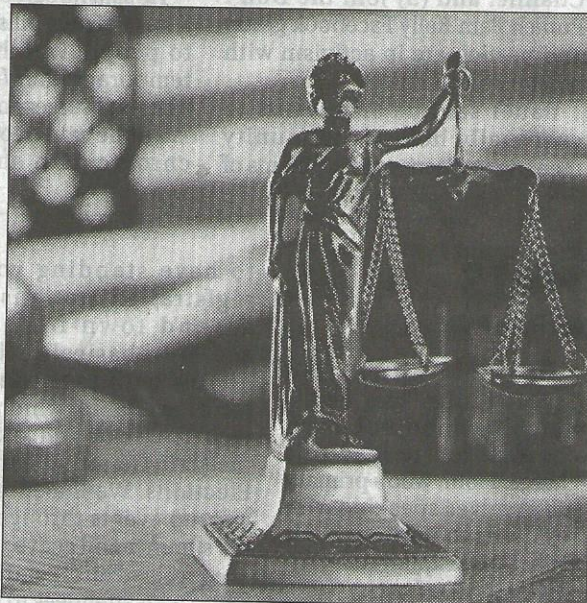
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