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MN To Lose 72 Public Defenders To Budget Cuts

ST. PAUL (AP) — Those accused of crimes in Minnesota will likely face longer waits for their day in court and parents trying to hang onto their children will stop getting free legal representation after the state Board of Public Defense voted Thursday to cut more than 15 percent of its lawyers.

That translates into the equivalent of 72 full-time positions. The board said in a release that it faces a \$3.8 million deficit after the Legislature cut \$1.5 million from its budget to address a state shortfall.

Public defenders represent the majority of defendants in Minnesota, including 85 percent of those accused of felonies and half of those accused of misdemeanors. The average public defender handles 714 cases a year, a number expected to top 800 after the job cuts take effect next month.

"Our clients are going to notice it the most," said Bill Ward, chief public defender in the 10th judicial district on the northern edge of the Twin Cities. "There is going to be delay."

Ward said the staff cuts will ripple through the court system, forcing more delays in trials and making local jurisdictions wait longer to collect fines, fees and assessments.

Of the 72 cuts, 19 are vacant jobs that won't be filled, about 30 will be eliminated through early retirements and other voluntary departures and the equivalent of 23 or 24 full-time attorneys will face layoffs, Ward said.

The board will stop representing parents in child protection and parental rights termination cases because public defenders are not required to provide those services.

Brian Melendez, who heads the Minnesota State Bar Association, said the cuts are disappointing.

"Any cuts to an already underfunded system are going to strain that system even further," he said.

Minnesota currently has the equivalent of 441 full-time public defenders.



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They will stop representing parents in child protection and parental rights termination cases starting next month because they're not required to provide those services. (File0 CBS)

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