

Wisconsin Justice Initiative: Joint Finance vote a good first step on private attorney pay

Posted on Wednesday, May 29, 2019

>> WisPolitics is now on the State Affairs network. Get custom keyword notifications, bill tracking and all WisPolitics content. [Get the app or access via desktop.](#)

Contact Gretchen Schuldt, WJI executive director: 414-331-0724;
gretchen@wjiinc.org

May 29, 2019 – The Joint Finance Committee’s recommendation to increase the pay of private lawyers representing indigent clients is a good first step but more needs to be done, the Wisconsin Justice Initiative said Wednesday.

“The \$70 per hour recommended by Joint Finance is much better than the \$40 the private lawyers are getting now, but it’s still not enough,” WJI Executive Director Gretchen Schuldt said. “The amount, at minimum, should be indexed to inflation.”

The \$40 rate is the lowest in the nation, and is not enough to cover the average lawyer’s overhead.

The State Public Defender’s Office appoints lawyers when its own caseload is too great, or when it has a conflict. Lawyers are increasingly refusing to take those SPD appointments because the low pay means they lose money on the cases. The situation is especially dire in rural counties, where defendants in criminal cases can sit in jail for extended periods because SPD cannot find lawyers to represent them.

The proposed increase would be the first in decades, and it is entirely possible that without indexing, it will be another several decades before private lawyers see another pay bump, Schuldt said.

“We applaud what Joint Finance did,” Schuldt said. “Just not as loudly as we would like.”