

‘UpFront’: State public defender says it will take years to clear 35,000-case backlog

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Wisconsin State Public Defender Kelli Thompson says it will take several years to clear a backlog of roughly 35,000 cases because of a shortage of public defenders.

“It is a statewide problem,” Thompson said on WISN’s “UpFront,” produced in partnership with WisPolitics.com. “It’s something that we all have to be talking about.”

Thompson, who leads the state agency, said the pandemic exacerbated a problem that was already forming.

“We have hindering people’s rights to a speedy trial,” she said. “We have individuals sitting in custody waiting for their day in court. We have individuals whose family members are impacted because they’re not home with their families.”

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Thompson said the agency is currently down 17 percent to 20 percent of its typical attorneys.

“We’re seeing this across the economy,” Thompson said. “Every business has shortages. Everyone is looking for employees. We’re looking for public defenders. We’re looking for staff.”

Thompson said the agency is working with lawmakers and already looking ahead to the next budget cycle.

“This is a budgetary issue,” Thompson said. “We’re working, we’re constantly

talking with our legislators. We've been fortunate in Wisconsin. I think our legislators recognize the important work public defenders, prosecutors, our criminal justice stakeholder members are doing."

Turning to politics, Thompson, the daughter of former Gov. Tommy Thompson, said he has not told her whether he will seek another term.

"I think he really wanted to take some time and think about what his next steps are," she said. "He can't even think about the word retirement, and so he has to find out what his next passion might be. He certainly loves politics. I don't think anybody would argue with that, but I really think he has to sit down, and I think as a family we have to sit down and have some discussions about this."

Pastor Kenneth Lock II, who serves as chaplain for the Milwaukee Bucks, says he'll continue resisting the pressure to preach politics from the pulpit as his church undergoes a major expansion in Milwaukee.

"Every pastor is urged to be political," Lock said. "You have your donors, you've got people here who say we believe this is what you should be telling people. I'm just not going to be moved by the popular opinion, and for sure I'm never going to be moved by somebody buying me off."

Evolve Church, where Lock is senior pastor, is constructing a new facility on Milwaukee's northwest side that will include a community center for youth and families complete with mentoring and tutoring for at-risk youth and mental health resources and programs for families across the region.

"About 80 percent of our church three years ago were in no one's church," Lock said. "It's not that they didn't want to explore faith. It was just more so they didn't find a place that spoke to them or a space that made sense for them and their families in their own personal journeys."

Former MLB Commissioner Bud Selig recalled a poignant story involving a former U.S. senator as the sport marked the 75th anniversary of Jackie Robinson breaking the color barrier.

"Herb Kohl and I went to Chicago," Selig said. "Jackie's first game at Wrigley Field - May of 1947 and what a day that was. You couldn't get in the ballpark. We finally got three seats in the upper deck, and what a great experience that was."

Selig, in an interview at his downtown Milwaukee office, called Robinson one of the most important people in the 20th century as the league continues addressing diversity.

“I think Jackie would give us a C, C+,” Selig said. “We’ve done alright, but we can do much better.”

Selig holds the title of commissioner emeritus and continues teaching classes at UW-Madison, Marquette Law School and Arizona State University.

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