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HOUSE BILL NO. 306

Offered January 10, 2024

Prefiled January 5, 2024

A *BILL to amend and reenact §§ 19.2-159 and 19.2-163.4 of the Code of Virginia, relating to appointment of counsel; public defenders; caseload exception.*

Patron—Ballard

Referred to Committee for Courts of Justice

Be it enacted by the General Assembly of Virginia:

1. That §§ 19.2-159 and 19.2-163.4 of the Code of Virginia are amended and reenacted as follows:

§ 19.2-159. Determination of indigency; guidelines; statement of indigence; appointment of counsel.

A. If the accused shall claim that he is indigent, and the charge against him is a criminal offense that may be punishable by confinement in the state correctional facility or jail, subject to the provisions of § 19.2-160, the court shall determine from oral examination of the accused or other competent evidence whether or not the accused is indigent within the contemplation of law pursuant to the guidelines set forth in this section.

B. In making its finding, the court shall determine whether or not the accused is a current recipient of a state or federally funded public assistance program for the indigent. If the accused is a current recipient of such a program and does not waive his right to counsel or retain counsel on his own behalf, he shall be presumed eligible for the appointment of counsel. This presumption shall be rebuttable where the court finds that a more thorough examination of the financial resources of the defendant is necessary. If the accused shall claim to be indigent and is not presumptively eligible under the provisions of this section, then a thorough examination of the financial resources of the accused shall be made with consideration given to the following:

1. The net income of the accused, which shall include his total salary and wages minus deductions required by law. The court also shall take into account income and amenities from other sources including but not limited to social security funds, union funds, veteran's benefits, other regular support from an absent family member, public or private employee pensions, dividends, interests, rents, estates, trusts, or gifts.

2. All assets of the accused which are convertible into cash within a reasonable period of time without causing substantial hardship or jeopardizing the ability of the accused to maintain home and employment. Assets shall include all cash on hand as well as in checking and savings accounts, stocks, bonds, certificates of deposit, and tax refunds. All personal property owned by the accused which is readily convertible into cash shall be considered, except property exempt from attachment. Any real estate owned by the accused shall be considered in terms of the amounts which could be raised by a loan on the property. For purposes of eligibility determination, the income, assets, and expenses of the spouse, if any, who is a member of the accused's household, shall be considered, unless the spouse was the victim of the offense or offenses allegedly committed by the accused.

3. Any exceptional expenses of the accused and his family which would, in all probability, prohibit him from being able to secure private counsel. Such items shall include but not be limited to costs for medical care, family support obligations, and child care payments.

The available funds of the accused shall be calculated as the sum of his total income and assets less the exceptional expenses as provided in the first paragraph of this subdivision 3. If the accused does not waive his right to counsel or retain counsel on his own behalf, counsel shall be appointed for the accused if his available funds are equal to or below 125 percent of the federal poverty income guidelines prescribed for the size of the household of the accused by the federal Department of Health and Human Services. The Supreme Court of Virginia shall be responsible for distributing to all courts the annual updates of the federal poverty income guidelines made by the Department.

If the available funds of the accused exceed 125 percent of the federal poverty income guidelines and the accused fails to employ counsel and does not waive his right to counsel, the court may, in exceptional circumstances, and where the ends of justice so require, appoint an attorney to represent the accused. However, in making such appointments, the court shall state in writing its reasons for so doing. The written statement by the court shall be included in the permanent record of the case.

C. If the court determines that the accused is indigent as contemplated by law pursuant to the guidelines set forth in this section, the court shall provide the accused with a statement which shall contain the following:

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59 "I have been advised this _____ day of _____, 20____, by the (name of court) court of my right to
60 representation by counsel in the trial of the charge pending against me; I certify that I am without
61 means to employ counsel and I hereby request the court to appoint counsel for me."

62 _____ (signature of accused)

63 The court shall also require the accused to complete a written financial statement to support the
64 claim of indigency and to permit the court to determine whether or not the accused is indigent within
65 the contemplation of law. The accused shall execute the said statements under oath, and the said court
66 shall appoint competent counsel to represent the accused in the proceeding against him, including an
67 appeal, if any, until relieved or replaced by other counsel.

68 The executed statements by the accused and the order of appointment of counsel shall be filed with
69 and become a part of the record of such proceeding.

70 All other instances in which the appointment of counsel is required for an indigent shall be made in
71 accordance with the guidelines prescribed in this section.

72 D. Except in jurisdictions having a public defender, or unless (i) the public defender is unable to
73 represent the defendant by reason of conflict of interest or; (ii) the court finds that appointment of other
74 counsel is necessary to attain the ends of justice; or (iii) *the public defender, after consultation with the*
75 *executive director of the Virginia Indigent Defense Commission, determines that the current active*
76 *caseload would preclude the public defender from providing adequate representation to new clients,*
77 counsel appointed by the court for representation of the accused shall be selected by a fair system of
78 rotation among members of the bar practicing before the court whose names are on the list maintained
79 by the Virginia Indigent Defense Commission pursuant to § 19.2-163.01. If no attorney who is on the
80 list maintained by the Virginia Indigent Defense Commission is reasonably available, the court may
81 appoint as counsel an attorney not on the list who has otherwise demonstrated to the court's satisfaction
82 an appropriate level of training and experience. The court shall provide notice to the Commission of the
83 appointment of the attorney.

84 **§ 19.2-163.4. Inapplicability of §§ 17.1-606 and 19.2-163 where public defender offices**
85 **established; exception.**

86 In counties and cities in which public defender offices are established pursuant to § 19.2-163.04,
87 defense services for indigents charged with jailable offenses shall be provided by the public defenders
88 unless (i) the public defender is unable to represent the defendant or petitioner by reason of conflict of
89 interest or; (ii) the court finds that appointment of other counsel is necessary to attain the ends of
90 justice; or (iii) *the public defender, after consultation with the executive director of the Virginia Indigent*
91 *Defense Commission, determines that the current active caseload would preclude the public defender*
92 *from providing adequate representation to new clients.* Except for the provisions of § 19.2-163 relating
93 to reasonable expenses, §§ 17.1-606 and 19.2-163 shall not apply when defense services are provided by
94 the public defenders.