

# **Public defenders' caseloads rise**



EDDY MONTVILLE | RRSTAR.COM

## **Catherine Ritts talks in her new office at Prairie State Legal Services Wednesday, Jan. 6, 2010, in Rockford. Prairie State provides legal help to the poor and elderly.**

ROCKFORD — Caseloads have increased for Winnebago County public defenders as budget constraints have forced county officials to dole out furloughs and leave positions unfilled.

How much those caseloads have grown is hard to say. The county is spending millions of dollars to upgrade its electronic judicial management system, which is expected to be able to track that type of data when it goes live in April. The existing court management system doesn't track caseloads in the Public Defender's office.

Dave Doll, first deputy public defender, said the office traditionally sees increases in caseloads from year to year. In financially difficult times, Doll said, the office may notice increases in cases relating to substance abuse, domestic violence and writing bad checks. However, he said, it's difficult to determine if any recent increases can be attributed to a rising tide of accused who cannot afford a private attorney.

"There are probably a greater percentage of people who are now eligible for our services," Doll said.

Doll estimates the Public Defender's office handles about 70 percent of all criminal cases in Winnebago County, excluding traffic cases. To qualify for a public defender, a person must be deemed by a judge to be indigent and unable to afford an attorney.

Prairie State Legal Services, which provides legal help to poor or elderly people, has seen the effects of the economy as well, said Cathy Ritts, managing attorney. The firm has seen an 86 percent increase in foreclosure cases, a 37 percent spike in utility cases and a 24 percent increase in bankruptcy cases this year, compared with 2008.

“I think we are seeing the same number of open cases, but we are seeing different kinds of cases,” Ritts said.

Prairie State has five attorneys who provide help on local civil cases. Ritts said not all of their clients have always fit into the low-income category.

“We are seeing people who used to have money,” she said. “In these foreclosure cases, a lot of those people had nice houses. We had high- or middle-income people who are now low-income people and are facing a whole new world.”

With more people qualifying for public legal help, Doll said, that could eventually lead to more cases for the office.

The Public Defender’s office has 26 attorneys, down from 32, and they all remain dedicated to representing all their clients with the same enthusiasm, he said.

“It’s always about our clients, and you can’t let those things affect your representation,” Doll said. “The next person and the next one after that needs you just as much as the last 300.” Doll said it is a legitimate concern that public defenders could become burned out from heavy caseloads, and that the office could not sustain any additional budget constraints.

“It is a source of concern but also a source of pride, really,” he said. “This office has always been proud of the fact that we work hard and we handle a lot of stress. If you can’t handle that kind of stress, you can’t do this job.”

*Reach staff writer Matt Williams at [mwilliams@rrstar.com](mailto:mwilliams@rrstar.com) or 815-987-1389.*

<http://www.rrstar.com/carousel/x370518673/Budgets-shrink-as-caseloads-rise-for-public-defenders>