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The need for the state of Louisiana to put more money into its indigent defense offices is unlikely to ever become a real cause célèbre. It's difficult for the average law-abiding citizen to generate much sympathy for those who have been accused of committing crimes. Nevertheless, the pursuit of justice requires that poor people who are charged with crimes have adequate legal representation.

Unfortunately, the average indigent defendant in Louisiana can expect to get legal representation that's far less than adequate, and state officials have the responsibility to make that situation right.

Most of the state's indigent defense offices are underfunded and overworked. A lawyer with the National Association of Criminal Defense Attorneys told a state task force Thursday that Louisiana needs to devote \$55 million per year to indigent defense if it wants a justice system that's fair to the accused. That's \$23 million more than is currently being spent.

Granted, the association is biased. The group not only is made up of defense lawyers, but it has filed a lawsuit in Calcasieu Parish that argues that the public defender's office in that parish is so substandard that it has effectively denied suspects their right to counsel. Still, the group's advocacy for its cause shouldn't be used to obscure the fact that Louisiana's system is in serious need of fixing.

In some parishes the public defender's office has more than 400 felony defendants, far above the recommended caseload of 150. What chance does a defendant have of aggressive representation when lawyers are juggling so many cases?

One of the members of the task force, state Sen. Lydia P. Jackson of Shreveport, said she thinks the \$55 million figure offered by the defense lawyers group is probably accurate. She said the task force, which is made up of legislators, judges, lawyers and law professors, would begin looking for the money.

They need to find it. While poor people who are accused of crimes might not make it onto a list of the state's most popular causes, justice demands that they be provided with lawyers who will work tirelessly on their behalf.