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BODY:

An innocent person who shows up in criminal court without a lawyer would do well to bring a toothbrush. Innocence is not a substitute for legal acumen, and a person resorting to self-representation can be thoroughly overwhelmed and befuddled by a prosecutor with years of legal training and practice.

The U.S. Supreme Court has held that defendants who don't have the money to hire a lawyer shouldn't be left to flounder in the courtroom but should instead have a lawyer provided to them. Nevertheless, Louisiana has done a poor job providing competent counsel for indigent defendants -- and to hear Baton Rouge Parish District Attorney Doug Moreau tell it, the state shouldn't even try.

The district attorney made his remarks in advance of an upcoming meeting of the **Indigent Defense** Task Force. Because Louisiana spends far less on **indigent defense** than other states its size, the Louisiana Legislature created the task force. The group will meet Dec. 8 to discuss an increase in the **indigent defense** budget.

That's a noble pursuit, but Mr. Moreau argues that taxpayers shouldn't be asked to pay for defense lawyers and says the fact that defendants are presumed innocent unless proved guilty is all the protection they need.

That's nonsense. It is crucial that the government provide lawyers for people who can't afford them; not only that, it's crucial that the government adequately fund the offices that provide those lawyers.


Mr. Moreau makes reference to the presumption of innocence, but his argument presumes

guilt. For who wouldn't want to see government funds used to keep innocent people out of jail?

Of course, many indigent people who appear in court will be guilty, but they might not be guilty as charged. So even then, it's in the public's best interest to provide lawyers who'll fight for them.

Providing lawyers for the defense of the poor makes the adversarial system fair. That might not be the way Mr. Moreau would like it, but it's the way it ought to be.

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