

**The News-Star** (Monroe, Louisiana) (Editorial) – *Doing right by the system* – (Thursday, July 24, 2008) –

Given the chance to vote, the public might rank the public defender right behind the defendant as the most unpopular character in the courtroom.

That's because the public oftentimes assumes the worst of defendants, and thinks little or even less of those who are paid money to plead their case.

We disagree. Dutiful public defenders provide a needed service for the defendants, for the court system and the public. If they do their jobs well, they give defendants an even chance in the justice system - and every person of good intentions wants the justice system to be level and fair.

Moreover, good public defenders make criminal dockets move faster. When they do their jobs well, they can lessen the need for appeals by providing competent defense for the accused.

That's why northeastern Louisianians should be encouraged that a recent study suggests there have been improvements in the public defender system in northeastern Louisiana. ULM assistant professor Kevin Unter led a ULM team in a study of indigent defense in the 3rd, 4th, 5th and 6th judicial districts, concluding there has been "some improvement in managing public defender caseloads" by supervisors in the judicial districts.

Unter, an assistant professor in political science, cited appointment of a chief public defender who supervises contract attorneys who take indigent cases. Additional funding allocated by the state bolsters those supervisors who provide for indigent defense. Better still, the supervisors have more independence - and appear to have more independence - than public defenders who operated under public defender boards that were appointed by judges.

Additional funding has enabled better public defenders to build better cases for their indigent clients. That makes our judicial system fairer.

The reforms started during Gov. Kathleen Blanco's term, but have continued - they should - under the Jindal administration. It's a proud legacy for Blanco and a good practice by Jindal.

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