

From: [Fernandes, Stephanie](#)
To: [Luzerne County Council Meeting Public Comments](#)
Subject: Letter for This Evening: Budget Work Session
Date: Tuesday, November 15, 2022 1:07:49 PM
Attachments: [Letter to Council Budget PD Comment.docx](#)

Good afternoon,
I have attached a letter for this evening.

Name: Stephanie Fernandes
Residence: Kingston
Meeting: Budget Work Session
Agenda Item: Public Defender's Office (Number 4)

If you would prefer me to put the letter in the body of the email instead of attaching as a Word document, please let me know.

Thanks very much,
Steph

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Dear Council Members

I am Assistant Public Defender Steph Fernandes, a resident of Kingston Borough. I have worked as a PD for just over seven and a half years. Unfortunately, I cannot speak in-person this evening because my two-year-old would be cute, but disruptive.

The Luzerne County Public Defender's Office is special. It is full of passionate, hard-working, caring, and zealous folks who seek to ensure our justice system operates fairly, even for folks who are poor.

I moved here from Ohio in 2015 for this job. Frankly, I stayed here because of this office. Since moving, I found a fellow transplant from New York. We married, had a kid, and bought a house. I am not the only PD who came here from out-of-county, nor the only one from out-of-state currently working here. Truly, this office is special. It has the power to attract people to Luzerne County, and the demonstrated potential to keep people, as well.

However, I believe I can speak for all of us when I say we are tired. I know that my salary is not indicative of my intrinsic value, but my salary does mean something. I have over seven years of experience, but make just under eight hundred dollars more than the starting salary. My salary is less-than fifty cents per hour higher than a lawyer hired to start tomorrow, a fifteen dollar a week bonus. It is hard not to be insulted that my over seven years of experience in this office equates to forty-six cents an hour.

Meanwhile, our shortages are debilitating. We all, PD's and ADA's alike, are putting in more than work hours. I personally arrive to work early every day and work through lunch four, if not five, days a week. I am tired of also putting in hours on vacation days, days off (like Veteran's Day last week), and weekends. There is simply too much to do, and not enough of us to do it, and the result is an alarming amount of burnout.

There has been farewell party after farewell party for good attorneys, both from the PD's and DA's Office, who take with them institutional knowledge and valuable experience. We have lost excellent public servants who have come to the realization that this job is simply not sustainable. The result is gaping vacancies in our office, loss of more-experienced colleagues, and a work load that is extremely stressful.

It is increasingly difficult to explain to concerned family and friends, and even to myself at times, why I continue working at the PD's Office. Currently, my love for being a public defender and gratitude for an office that feels like family keep me here. Yet, as salaries and raises remain minimal, vacancies remain open, and caseloads and stress rise, the justification becomes more and more difficult to make.

On behalf of an exhausted, but spirited, group, I beg Council to consider our offices when crafting the budget. We carry on as best we can with our shortage, but I truly believe you have the power to make our positions more attractive and sustainable.

Sincerely,

Attorney Steph Fernandes