Kent County, Michigan, Public Defense Assessment

National Association for Public Defense

Report forthcoming, January 2024

Executive Summary

The Kent County Indigent Defense Administration Office (KCIDAO) received a grant from the Michigan Indigent Defense Commission (MIDC) for an assessment of the Kent County indigent defense delivery system. The National Association for Public Defense (NAPD) was selected to conduct this assessment.

The overarching goal was to determine to what extent the current system maximizes available resources and optimizes services to clients and staff across Kent County. To complete its assessment, NAPD selected an assessment team, who reviewed records, observed processes, and interviewed people involved in public defense in Kent County.

NAPD finds that Kent County has made meaningful progress in improving its delivery of indigent defense services. The Kent County Indigent Defense Administrative Office (KCIDAO), supported by state funding, has helped ensure qualified counsel is appointed promptly for people who qualify.

NAPD also finds, however, that Kent County's structure for public defense administration – divided between the County, the City of Grand Rapids, and a three-court collaborative – does not have proper controls for overseeing all public defense operations and managing conflicts of interest. It also finds that the non-profit public defender, Kent County Office of the Defender (KCOD), is lacking effective oversight and leadership.

NAPD therefore recommends that Kent County makes these changes to improve its operational efficiency and quality of services:

- Consolidate public defense administration under KCIDAO.
- Create a county-run public defender office.
- Establish a public defense oversight board.
- Institute practices at the public defender office that support a culture of sustainability and safety.
- Develop county-wide practice standards and data reporting processes.

NAPD thanks Kent County for its cooperation with this report and is available for further consultation on implementing these changes.