



Regional Public Defender Offices

Regional partnerships may offer a solution for smaller counties looking to improve their indigent defense systems.



**Office of the State
Public Defender**

Indigent Defense Improvement Division



What is a regional public defender office?

A regional public defender office is an institutional public defender office that provides indigent defense services to a geographical area that includes two or more neighboring counties.

California Government Code section 27700 expressly authorizes two or more counties to jointly establish such a regional public defender office.

Pathways to creating a regional public defender office

Establish a partnership with an existing county public defender office: A smaller county can engage a neighboring county with an existing public defender office to expand services into their region via a satellite office.

OR

Build a new multi-county public defender office: Two or more small contract-based counties can join together to create a new, structured public defender office to serve multiple communities.

Benefits of a regional public defender office

Significant empirical research demonstrates the benefits of institutional public defender offices when compared to contract systems or managed assigned counsel systems.

A regional approach may allow smaller counties that are otherwise unable to stand up an individual public defender office to achieve the benefits of an institutional defender, including:

- Increased accountability through structured leadership, supervision and support for attorneys.¹
- Improved representation through full-time, salaried attorneys working exclusively on indigent caseloads.²
- Greater system efficacy, including reduced incarceration rates and more appropriate sentencing.³
- Longer-term cost savings and system efficiencies.⁴



California precedent for multi-county partnerships

California counties have already demonstrated multi-county partnerships provide a viable alternative for constituent services, including:

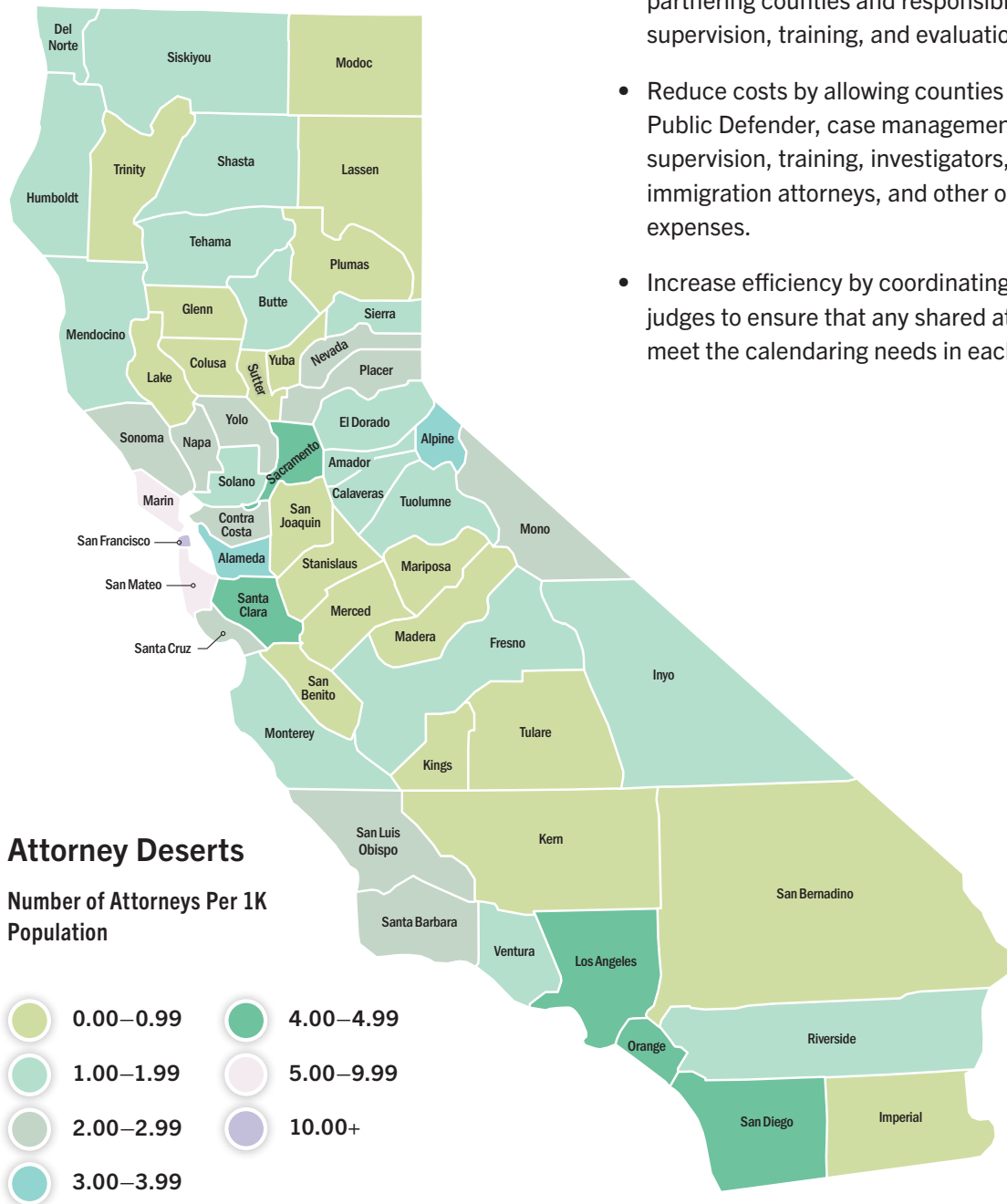
- Child support services, where a larger county provides primary leadership for a satellite office in a smaller county.⁵
- Juvenile halls, where inter-county regional agreements allow counties to place incarcerated youth in other counties' juvenile halls.⁶

Meeting the unique challenges of smaller counties

Smaller and geographically remote counties face distinct challenges in recruiting and retaining indigent defense attorneys, including severe attorney shortages, increasing retirements of existing attorneys, and lack of defense leadership and attorney support.

Regional public defense models could:

- Increase the pool of qualified attorneys by pulling from a larger geographical area.
- Improve recruitment and retention rates by fostering a defender community and capitalizing on a central public defender office with capacity and resources to actively recruit and train recent law school graduates and new attorneys.
- Increase accountability through the appointment of a Chief Public Defender responsive to all partnering counties and responsible for oversight, supervision, training, and evaluation of attorneys.
- Reduce costs by allowing counties to share a Chief Public Defender, case management systems, supervision, training, investigators, social workers, immigration attorneys, and other overhead expenses.
- Increase efficiency by coordinating with presiding judges to ensure that any shared attorneys can meet the calendaring needs in each county.



Examples of regional public defender offices in other states

The regional public defender model has been successfully implemented in other states to address the indigent defense needs of rural and geographically remote areas.

Michigan

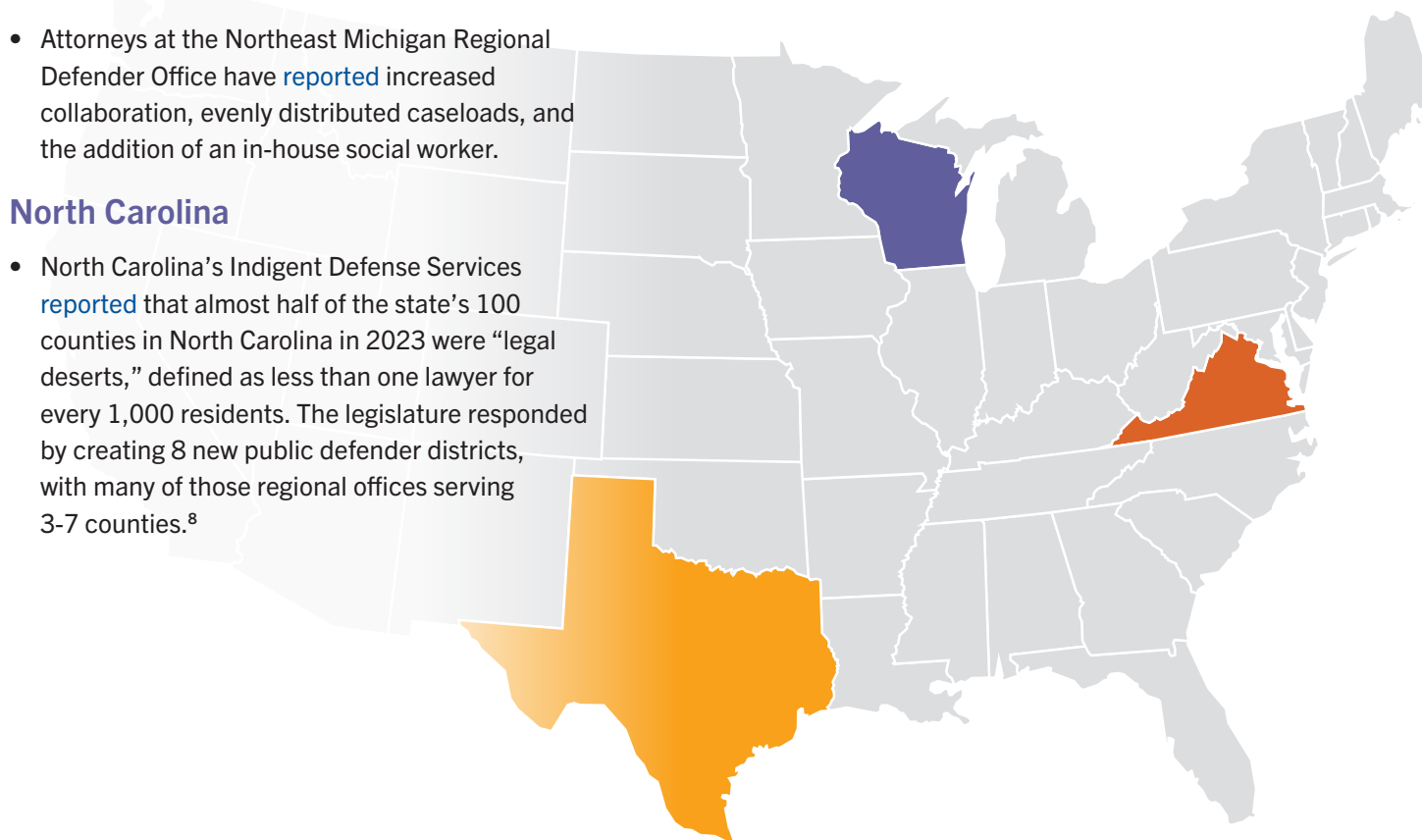
- Michigan’s Indigent Defense Commission promotes [regional models](#) as a solution for “smaller counties that share a common pool of attorneys who want to reduce overhead expenses by having a central base-location and/or administration through a Chief Regional Public Defender.”⁷
- [Manistee-Benzie Public Defender Office](#) in western Michigan was created in response to state legislation aimed at improving indigent defense services. This office shares a staff of six—2 supervising attorneys, 3 staff attorneys, and an office manager—while maintaining physical office locations in both counties to serve the bi-county community.
- Attorneys at the Northeast Michigan Regional Defender Office have [reported](#) increased collaboration, evenly distributed caseloads, and the addition of an in-house social worker.

North Carolina

- North Carolina’s Indigent Defense Services [reported](#) that almost half of the state’s 100 counties in North Carolina in 2023 were “legal deserts,” defined as less than one lawyer for every 1,000 residents. The legislature responded by creating 8 new public defender districts, with many of those regional offices serving 3-7 counties.⁸

Texas

- The Texas legislature recently established 12 new [regional public defender offices](#) serving 57 rural counties and 3 mid-sized counties.⁹ These regional public defender offices serve sparsely populated areas.
- [Regional public defender offices](#) established in Texas have successfully addressed many of the issues in these rural counties. 67 percent of survey respondents in these counties reported that the establishment of these public defender offices improved both the availability of lawyers and the quality of representation in their jurisdiction.¹⁰
- Texas also has specialized multi-jurisdictional offices. The [Lone Star Defender Office](#) appoints counsel for “Operation Lone Star” cases arising out of 8 counties, providing indigent criminal legal defense for those stopped at the border.



- 1 See Primus, “The Problematic Structure of Indigent Defense Delivery” (2023) 122 Mich. L. Rev. 207, 247, [found here](#).
- 2 Id. at 249-254.
- 3 Id. at 241; Cohen, “Who is Better at Defending Criminals? Does Type of Defense Attorney Matter in Terms of Producing Favorable Case Outcomes?” (2014) 25 Criminal Justice Policy Review 29, [found here](#).
- 4 Primus, “The Problematic Structure of Indigent Defense Delivery” (2023) 122 Mich. L. Rev. 207, 249-253.
- 5 Mariposa County Department of Child Support Services regionalized with the Merced County Department of Child Support Services effective May 1, 2016. (See p. 77 of budget, [found here](#).) [San Benito and Santa Cruz](#) counties also have a joint child support services office.
- 6 [Yuba, Sutter, and Colusa](#) have joined together to create a Tri-County Juvenile Hall. [Lake and Tehama](#) counties share a juvenile hall. [Mariposa](#) contracts with Tuolumne, Madera, and Kern to house juvenile hall youth.
- 7 Michigan Indigent Defense Commission. [Delivery System Reform Models](#), p. 17.
- 8 North Carolina Newsline. (September 28, 2023). [Eight new public defender districts funded in the budget--but legal deserts remain](#).
- 9 Public Policy Research Institute, Texas A&M University. (June, 2024). [Justice Beyond the Cities: The State of Rural Public Defense in Texas](#), p.26.
- 10 Texas Indigent Defense Commission, [Public Defender Primer](#) p. 27-28.



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