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[NEWS](#)

\$31 an Hour: That's How Much Some Lawyers Are Making



"A lot of people I know have left—not because they want to leave, but they have to leave," said attorney Devon Waring.



March 17, 2023 at 01:58 PM



Legal Services



Lisa Willis



According to the [World Population Review](#), when it comes to the number of lawyers per capita globally, the United States leads the pack with 1.26 million lawyers.

Most lawyers are centered in [New York](#) and [California](#).

[Florida](#) is a close third with more than 110,000 attorneys licensed to practice in in the state, according to the state's only mandatory bar, The Florida Bar.

But how does Florida rank in terms of pay?

Career website [Indeed](#) says the average annual pay for a new attorney in Florida is \$90,102 year.

For the private sector, that works out to be approximately \$43 an hour.

And how does the Public Defender's office rank in the mix? Far less. A lot less.

'They Have to Leave'

According to Florida Public Defender for Miami-Dade circuit court, Carlos J. Martinez, his assistant public defenders (APDs) remain in the bottom 10% for average compensation for APDs and assistant state attorneys (ASA) throughout the United States.

Martinez has been in Tallahassee lately fighting to change [those statistics](#).

"I have been speaking with legislators about the crisis we are facing in Miami in both my office and the state attorney's office," Martinez said.

His office pointed to a report in [TaxWatch](#) which concluded, as of 2021, the average national starting salary for assistant state attorneys was \$66,802, and for assistant public defenders was \$65,939.

Quick math breakdown: That would be \$31 an hour, but they are not paid by the hour.

Martinez says his office loses 50% of new attorneys every two years to higher-paying firms. He points out that of 34 assistant public defenders hired in January 2021, half had left by December 2022.

"I hope that we can get to a point where we are making a higher wage and more competitive wage," said Devon Waring of the Public Defender's Office, referring to losing colleagues to better-paying private sector jobs. "I think a lot of people I know have left—not because they want to leave, but they have to leave."

Gideon's Hope

Waring is a recent recipient of a scholarship from Gideon's Hope which held a fundraiser at the Miami office of Hogan Lovells Thursday night. She said she was grateful for the financial assistance the award provided when she needed it the most, allowing her to remain as an assistant public defender.

Co-founder of the organization, Kevin Hellmann, who is also a public defense lawyer, said the reason for the turnover always comes down to financial need.

"We would love to stay but we cannot afford to," Hellmann said was the parting line of many colleagues who left for firms offering much higher paying positions. "I watched some of the best lawyers, advocating for poor people in Miami-Dade county, who were charged with crimes, leave. We thought, 'What can we do to supplement all the efforts that our office is making to try and get fully funded?/ So we decided to create a nonprofit organization: That's Gideon's Hope."

Liana Matthews has been with the Public Defender's Office for 10 years, and was one of Gideon's Hope first awardees.

"That grant did help us a lot, especially since I was pregnant with my second child and about to take maternity leave as the state of Florida who writes our paycheck does not pay for maternity leave, unlike a lot of private firms," Matthews said.

The money helped support her family financially, which is why she decide to stay with the public defender's office all these years, she said.

Both attorneys said they were grateful for Martinez's effort in the state capital to help increase their pay.

'There's Really No Better Feeling'

Margot Moss was also an assistant public defender an co-sponsor of the organization. While she worked at the office for more than 10 years, she is now a partner at Markus/Moss in Miami. She said while crime is on the rise, so too are cases of wrongfully accused citizens in Miami-Dade who can not afford an attorney.

The need for public defenders is paramount and keeping salaries competitive will increase their chances of holding on to attorneys longer, she said.

"A lot of people talk about the public defender in a very condescending way, but people don't realize some of the best lawyers coming out of law school are going to the Public Defender's Office." Moss added. "They could be taking a job at a firm making \$150,000 a year, but instead they make the choice to take a much lower salary to do good for our society

and for our community.”

“Our mission is purely to recognize and retain talented and dedicated public defense lawyers in Miami. We recognize the importance of the prosecutors and police in the system, but because of our backgrounds our focus is drawn towards maintaining a strong public defense office,” said Hellmann, who is also the director of training and professionalism at the Miami-Dade Public Defender’s Office.

Former Miami-Dade Public Defender Bennett H. Brummer is credited as the driving force behind Gideon’s Hope and a donor to the cause, the organization said.

Matthews says it is the feeling she gets from a not-guilty verdict and saving someone’s life that keeps her staying put.

“There’s really no better feeling honestly than to be able to dedicate your career to people who very, very much need it when they’re at the lowest point in their life, and they often don’t have anyone helping them and you are their champion,” Matthews said. “That’s just an incredible feeling. It’s the best feeling in the world—to have that as your job, day to day.”

For more information on Gideon’s Hope, visit <https://www.gideonshope.net>.

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