



ERIC J. RICHEY

WHATCOM COUNTY PROSECUTING ATTORNEY

Erik K. Sigmar, Chief Criminal Deputy
Dona Bracke, Assistant Chief Criminal Deputy
Christopher Quinn, Chief Civil Deputy
Hilary Thomas, Chief of Staff

November 13, 2025

Whatcom County Council Members
311 Grand Avenue
Bellingham, WA 98225

Re: *Request for Supplemental Budget
for Full-Time Civil Attorney Position*

Dear Members of the Council,

I am writing to formally request a supplemental budget allocation to hire an additional attorney for our Civil Division to share a caseload with both our child support enforcement unit and the Civil Division attorneys who provide legal support and representation of all County departments. Our office recently started handling the child support enforcement work for Skagit County and San Juan County, and the Council recently approved increasing our budget authority to support this work through 2025. This civil attorney position would be funded up to 50% by the State in exchange for the Child Support Enforcement Unit's handling of this caseload for Skagit and San Juan counties. The remaining 50% FTE would be assigned to the Civil Division advising and representing County departments. With growing workload demands facing our Civil Division attorneys, which will be further impacted by a significant staffing adjustment, I am seeking County funding to support a 50% FTE attorney position to enable this office to hire an additional full-time civil attorney that will handle both child support enforcement work and Civil Division representation of County departments.

As you are aware, the number of civil attorneys in my office has essentially remained the same for 30 years. During this time, both the size of our county government and the scope of our government operations have grown significantly, increasing the demand for legal advice and representation from the Civil Division. This Division is continually called upon to handle an expanding range of legal issues with increased frequency and yet, this Division currently operates with fewer civil attorneys than the City of Bellingham and Skagit County.

In addition, our Chief Civil Deputy, Chris Quinn, just recently announced his decision to leave the office to pursue new career opportunities. In candid discussions with Chris, whom I have found to be a dedicated and hard-working leader, he highlighted the significant strain the Division is under operating at full capacity while striving to maintain high-quality legal advice. He shared concerns that the ever-increasing demands facing the Civil Division will impact both the efficiency and effectiveness of their work, as well as morale going forward. In my opinion, these concerns

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underscore the urgent need for additional resources to ensure this office remains effective in providing needed legal support to County departments.

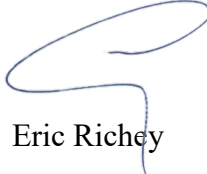
While I fully recognize the current fiscal constraints the County is facing, I believe this request presents a unique opportunity to fund a full time civil attorney, at a lower cost to the County. State funding will cover approximately 50% of the position, which allows us to expand the role without placing a significant burden on County resources. While this full-time position won't solve all of our challenges in the Civil Division, it will help alleviate some of the pressure our Civil Division is facing and ensure that this unit can continue to provide high-quality service to the County.

The supplemental budget request for this position is attached. It indicates that DHHS will provide \$95,000.00 for a half-time position, so it would only cost the County an additional \$70,699.00 to create this full-time attorney FTE. (This supplemental budget request is in addition to Supplemental Budget Request #51784 under Agenda Bill 2025707, on the Council's Dec. 2nd agenda, for the non-attorney costs related to the Skagit and San Juan County Support Services in 2026 which costs would be reimbursed by the State.)

I greatly appreciate your thoughtful consideration of this request. Expanding the Civil Division's capacity to handle the growing demands of the County will have lasting benefits for all County operations. I look forward to speaking to you about this proposal on the 18th of November, if time on your Agenda permits.

Thank you for your time and support,

WHATCOM COUNTY PROSECUTOR

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read 'Eric Richey', with a stylized, looping initial 'E'.

Eric Richey

Supplemental Budget Request

Prosecuting Attorney

Suppl ID # 5029 Fund 1000 Cost Center 10006505 Originator: Leah DeVries

Expenditure Type: Ongoing Year 2 2026 Add'l FTE ☒ Add'l Space ☐ Priority 5

Name of Request: Additional Civil DPA

X

Department Head Signature (Required on Hard Copy Submission)

Date

9/25/25

Costs:	Object	Object Description	Amount Requested
	4333.9306	DHHS-child support enforcement	(\$95,000)
	6110	Regular salaries and wages	\$114,420
	6210	Retirement	\$11,713
	6230	Social security	\$9,432
	6245	Medical insurance	\$20,532
	6255	Other health and welfare benef	\$2,643
	6259	Worker's comp-interfund	\$1,186
	6269	Unemployment-interfund	\$160
	6340	Books, publications and subscr	\$2,313
	6510	Tools and equipment	\$1,800
	6780	Education and training	\$1,500
	Request Total		\$70,699

1a. Description of request:

The proposal is to expand civil legal services within Whatcom County government by hiring an additional attorney to the civil division of the PA's Office. This new legal counsel position will provide dedicated support to elected officials/department heads and their growing offices and staff. This position will also provide for a .5 FTE for our Child Support Services Division (CSS), to handle the Skagit/San Juan County caseload our office agreed to handle starting September of this year, which work will be reimbursed by the State Division of Child Support (DCS). (We have submitted a separate SBR#5174 for the non-attorney costs related to the Skagit/San Juan County caseload for 2026.) The primary focus will be on timely legal research, risk management, contract review, and advisory services to improve efficiency and ensure compliance with state and federal law.

1b. Primary customers:

The primary customers are Whatcom County's elected officials (e.g., County Executive, County Council, Sheriff, Assessor, Auditor, Treasurer, and Prosecuting Attorney) and County departments such as Public Works, Facilities, Planning & Development, Health and Community Services, Finance, Administrative Services, and Human Resources. Ultimately, it is the community that is being better served. In addition, the parents and children of Skagit and San Juan Counties will be served, as well as those in Whatcom County.

2. Problem to be solved:

Current legal staffing levels are insufficient to meet the increasing volume and complexity of legal needs across departments and the continued expansion of these offices and departments. This leads to delays in contract review, policy development, and legal opinions, which can stall projects and expose the County to legal risks. With additional legal support, the County can reduce liability, streamline interdepartmental processes, and maintain compliance with rapidly changing laws. In addition, our office has agreed to handle the child support services needs in Skagit and San Juan Counties for which the State DCS has

Thursday, September 25, 2025

Rpt: Rpt Suppl Regular

Supplemental Budget Request

Prosecuting Attorney

SupplID # 5029 Fund 1000 Cost Center 10006505 Originator: Leah DeVries

agreed to reimburse us and has increased our office's total annual award for 2026 to \$1 million to compensate the County for all the CSS work. It is anticipated that an additional .5 FTE attorney will be needed to handle the additional CSS work related to the Skagit/San Juan County caseload.

3a. Options / Advantages:

Other options considered include:

- * Outsourcing legal work to external counsel- This is significantly more expensive on an hourly basis and lacks continuity in knowledge.
- * Redistributing workload among current staff- Current legal staff are already operating at full capacity; further distribution would risk burnout and reduce the quality of legal services. Hiring an internal attorney is the most cost-effective and sustainable option, offering institutional knowledge, responsiveness, and long-term return on investment.

3b. Cost savings:

Hiring an internal attorney (estimated salary + benefits = ~\$150,000 annually) avoids the cost of contracting external counsel at rates of \$250-\$350/hour. Assuming 600-800 hours of external legal work would be needed annually, this saves:

- * Low Estimate: 600 hours × \$250 = \$150,000
- * High Estimate: 800 hours × \$350 = \$280,000

Thus, the County could save, at a minimum, \$100,000-\$150,000+ annually compared to outsourcing.

Even if a full FTE attorney weren't approved, our office would still need to hire/contract for the equivalent of a .5 FTE attorney to handle the Skagit and San Juan County work for 2026, presumably via a Special Deputy Appointment. Again, the State will be reimbursing us for that cost, and has awarded our CSS Division in its program budget for 2026 to compensate the County for this additional cost.

4a. Outcomes:

Outcomes to be delivered within 6 months of hiring include:

- * Faster turnaround times on legal requests and contract reviews (goal: 30% improvement)
- * Decrease in the use of external counsel
- * Improved legal risk mitigation through early involvement in department initiatives
- * Representation of Skagit and San Juan County child support services cases

4b. Measures:

Success will be measured by:

- * Reduction in average legal request turnaround time
- * Reduction in external counsel expenses
- * Internal client satisfaction surveys (targeting 90% satisfaction)
- * efficient processing of CSS cases for Skagit and San Juan Counties

5a. Other Departments/Agencies:

This request will positively impact all County departments that rely on legal services. Departments such as Public Works, Planning, Human Resources, and Finance will benefit from quicker access to legal counsel, enabling them to move forward with projects and contracts without delay. Elected officials will also receive more timely and tailored legal advice, improving governance.

It will also positively impact DCS as parentage and child support services will be handled in an efficient manner.

5b. Name the person in charge of implementation and what they are responsible for:

The Whatcom County Prosecuting Attorney's Office will be responsible for implementing this request. The point of contact will be the Chief Civil Deputy Prosecutor, Christopher Quinn, who will oversee recruitment, onboarding, and integration of the new attorney into existing workflows, to best address departmental and office needs.

6. Funding Source:

General Fund