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**Office of
State's Attorney
Champaign County, Illinois**

April 23, 2024

County Board members,

The purpose of this memo is not to give an opinion on county finances. I leave that to the professionals in county administration and on the Finance committee to determine our financial forecast, appropriate revenue sources, and funding opportunities. Rather, I write to request that as you are discussing long term public safety funding needs that you give thought to the following issues that I see both in the State's Attorney's Office and in the courts, criminal justice, and public safety departments.

Information Technology

As you know, the court systems are in the middle of a review of information technology needs, led by consultants from Berry Dunn. The focus of this review has been on the viability of our current court management system and has been somewhat limited to looking at whether we can update the system with our current vendor, or if we would be better served with a different system. In my opinion, that review needs to be broadened to add consideration of moving away from the one vendor fits all approach that we currently use and move towards considering systems that are tailored to the needs of each specific department. What the court needs from case management is different from what the SAO needs, is different from what Court Services needs, is different from what the PD needs. While an upgrade of our current system may solve the judiciary's issues, it will not address the SAO needs for digital evidence management, for data analysis, and for transparency of that data analysis for public consumption and review. Moreover, an

upgrade of the software itself will not address the very real deficiencies that each of our departments have when it comes to IT staff. That is not at all a criticism of the county IT department or its personnel, who do a fine job addressing our hardware issues. It is, however, a strong request for internal SAO IT staffing to support and assist our attorneys and support staff in using the technology that has become so vital in our day-to-day work. Upgrading our case management systems and adding IT staff to support our tech needs will be a significant but necessary investment in the SAO and in all public safety departments as we move forward.

Space and Accessibility

The Champaign County Courthouse addition opened in 2002, and other than some small, emergency renovations done in the height of the pandemic, the building has been relatively untouched since that time. Carpet, paint, benches, furnishings, courtroom layouts, chairs, doors, have only sporadically been updated, sometimes with leftover pieces and parts found in locked rooms in the basement. Some of these issues are cosmetic. The benches, which have been painful to sit in for 20 years, are now scratched with graffiti. Wallpaper that leaves a trail of dust when touched is falling from the walls. Juror chairs are broken and dirty. Desktops are chipped, drawers are stuck, chairs are broken, and need replaced. The SAO has a limited source of funding to replace and upgrade office furnishings that our partner departments do not have, and I have made it a priority to ensure that SAO staff have functional and useful office furnishings, emphasizing their physical well-being with supportive chairs, standing desks, and other modern hardware. Champaign County has failed to provide the public and other county departments with those same benefits and has never had office and courtroom furnishings in the capital asset replacement program.

Additionally, Champaign County needs to take a hard look at accessibility issues in the courthouse. The front door of the courthouse is the only access point with an accessible door button. The ramp from the lower level to the mezzanine is very steep and narrow, creating a safety hazard and a traffic jam should more than one person need to use it at a time. Bathrooms, offices, courtrooms, none of those offices are equipped for staff or

public who need assistance opening heavy doors. Inside the courtrooms, the layout of the jury boxes, witness box, ramps and access points present hurdles for attorneys, jurors, witnesses, and the public. At the height of the pandemic, we discussed these issues, and made do by moving chairs and blocking off benches, but we never addressed the significant structural issues that we have worked around since 2003, and we certainly did not do anything to look into the future and create courtrooms that were designed for the 21st century. Now, we have a new judge, but not a new courtroom for that judge, so we are doubling up and moving around, a process that is not sustainable for the long term and defeats the purpose of adding a judge to the roster. I strongly encourage County Board members to come to the courthouse and look around with a critical eye and ask yourself if we are providing the best facility we can to our staff and the public. In my opinion, it is long past time we did the work to make our courthouse accessible and useful.

Staffing, Salaries and Benefits

Simply put, Champaign County is lucky to have employees who find value in the work they do because we are, without question, underpaying our staff in comparison to similarly situated employers locally and state-wide. Employee compensation concerns and the ability to find less stressful work for significantly better pay elsewhere are a main driver of turnover in my office. Anecdotally, I can give example after example of attorneys and support staff who have left the SAO for other local government offices, for SAOs in other counties, or for private practice, largely because of significant salary increases offered elsewhere. My colleagues in other similarly sized counties have increased attorney starting salaries to \$20k above what we are offering, in some cases starting brand new attorneys at higher salaries than my experienced senior prosecutors. The city of Champaign is currently advertising a victim advocate position starting at \$20k more than the average salary of the SAO victim advocate division. And in addition to our comparably lower salaries, we are very lean in our support staff levels. Each secretary supports 3 to 4 attorneys. We have one paralegal, no IT professionals, no public access officer, no data analyst. All those responsibilities, necessary in a 21st century prosecutors office, fall to the attorneys on top of the significant responsibilities they have with regard

to their complex and heavy caseloads. The SAO is not alone in compensation and staffing issues and needs. The addition of a new judge, for example, has exacerbated staffing issues for the Court Security division, already operating short staffed for our courthouse needs. Public safety concerns continue to become more complex and bluntly, Champaign County has not kept up with the evolving and growing complexities and needs when it comes to staffing for those needs. Moving into the future this issue is only going to increase and funding for those increases needs to be addressed.

Thank you for considering the issues I have raised in this memo. I am happy to discuss my suggestions further, and to assist with in person tours and meetings for individual board members. Champaign County citizens deserve a modern, progressive, accessible, transparent, and professional public safety, courthouse, and criminal justice system. I look forward to working with you as we move forward,

Sincerely,

Julia Rietz
Champaign County State's Attorney