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EDITORIAL

Indigent defense: New York State needs reform now

New York has a constitutional obligation to provide defense attorneys for poor people accused of crimes, but the state simply isn't meeting it. That's an outrageous state of affairs that Albany shouldn't allow to continue.

How bad is it? The state's chief judge has called the current fractured, county-based public defender system an ongoing crisis. A court commission said in 2006 that the patchwork of programs lacks money, staff, experience,

training and any clear statewide standards for what constitutes an adequate legal defense. The New York Civil Liberties Union charged in a lawsuit filed last year that the state falls so far short of providing effective legal counsel that it's unconstitutional.

Compounding the problem, the state's counties are saddled with most of the bill. They paid \$271 million last year, the state only \$67 million. In Nassau, the tab this year will be \$9.3 million; in Suffolk

\$11.7 million. That's an underfunded mandate that property taxpayers shouldn't have to bear.

Legislation initiated in the Assembly would create an independent public defender commission to dissect the system's inadequacies. It would report to the legislature what it would take to ensure an adequate, independent legal defense, what it would cost and how to get there from here. It's a journey that officials need to take.