



Wisconsin State Public Defender

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****PRESS RELEASE****

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Wisconsin State Public Defender Nicholas L. Chiarkas Honored at the ABA's Annual Conference in Chicago

(Chicago, IL) On Friday, July 31, 2009, the Government and Public Sector Lawyers Division of the American Bar Association (ABA) presented Wisconsin State Public Defender Nicholas L. Chiarkas with the Dorsey Award. This prestigious national honor recognizes the extraordinary work of an outstanding public defender or legal aid lawyer. Chiarkas was accompanied by his wife Judy Olingy, a clinical law professor at UW Law School, and son Josh Chiarkas, a 2009 graduate of Edgewood High School.

During the pre-award reception discussion with the leadership of the Government and Public Sector Lawyers Division and Richard Goemann (Director of Legal Services for the National Legal Aid and Defender Association), Chiarkas praised U.S. Attorney General Eric Holder's June 24, 2009, address to the American Council of Chief Defenders in Washington, D.C. where he stated, "When I took the oath of office as Attorney General, I swore to support and defend the Constitution of the United States. Supporting and defending the Constitution includes, in my view, a responsibility to serve as guardians of the rights of all Americans, including the poor and underprivileged."

"While encouraged," Chiarkas added, "we are all aware that many places in America today still deny or restrict the right to counsel and thereby subject its poorest citizens to increased dangers of conviction merely because of their poverty. Unfortunately, areas of Wisconsin including Milwaukee remain a concern because of the low number of county appointments."

Chiarkas said, "A bill making its way to the Governor's office with more than 40 legislative co-sponsors and the support of the Wisconsin State Bar, members of our justice system, the Counties Association, NAACP, ACLU and the Commission to Reduce Racial Disparity will not only assure the right to counsel in Milwaukee, but will also save statewide taxpayers two million dollars a year." When asked if he thought the Governor would sign the bill, Chiarkas said that he was, "optimistic."

In his remarks following the conferring of the Dorsey Award, Chiarkas said:

We, government and public lawyers, have always embraced the wisdom that it's not what you get for the work you do; it's what you become by doing it. Being one of your colleagues is reward enough; being honored by you is actually quite moving...I'll tell you why.

I've long believed that those who have less in life should have more in law. Maybe that sounds a bit pie-in-the-sky naïve, but certainly you would agree that they should have an equal measure of law – as promised by the last three words of our Pledge of Allegiance – yet we know too well that they do not.

About ten years ago a judicial study found that Wisconsin state public defenders provided high quality representation to their clients. Before we could finish cheering we were told that 'quality' is not required, and the public defenders should lower their standard to 'adequate.' We, of course, did not, have not and will not.

It is upon this backdrop, and a tough 2009 budget year, that you, my brothers and sisters from across the country, honored us with the 2009 Dorsey Award. You, who understand what it takes to do this work day after day, clinging to quality for each client in the face of so many challenges, acknowledged us. I tell you as word spread you could feel the resurrection of morale throughout the Wisconsin state public defender agency.

And, so when I say that, "being honored by you was quite moving," I mean that on many levels and on behalf of our entire agency. Your timing was impeccable, your recognition more valuable than I could ever fully express. Thank you on behalf of our entire agency and our State Public Defender Board.

Dan Berkos, Chair of the Wisconsin State Public Defender Board, praised Chiarkas' innovative leadership bringing both national and international recognition to Wisconsin. Berkos said, "It is a bit ironic that while Wisconsin is recognized as having the best public defender program, Wisconsin also leads the nation in limiting access to state public defenders from some of its poorest citizen—those with total incomes of \$81 a week." Berkos added, "We are hopeful that this failing will soon be remedied."

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