

**HOUGHTON COUNTY BOARD OF COMMISSIONERS  
SPECIAL MEETING/WORK SESSION  
MARCH 31, 2025**

The Houghton County Board of Commissioners held a Special Meeting/Work Session on Monday, March 31, 2025 at 1:00 p.m. in the 5<sup>th</sup> Floor Conference Room of the Courthouse, City of Houghton with the public viewing in person and by Microsoft Teams.

**Call to Order:**

The meeting was called to order by Chairman Tikkanen at 1:00 p.m.

**Pledge of Allegiance:**

The Pledge of Allegiance was led by Chairman Tikkanen.

**Roll call:**

The following commissioners responded to roll call:

Tom Tikkanen, District 1; Joel Keranen, District 2; Roy Britz, District 5.  
Absent: Glenn Anderson, District 3; Gretchen Janssen, District 4.

**Approval of Minutes March 11, 2025, Regular Meeting:**

A Motion was made by Commissioner Keranen and seconded by Commissioner Britz to approve the March 11, 2025 Minutes as presented.

The Motion carried by a voice vote. Ayes 3, Nays 0.

**Approval of Agenda/Additions:**

The Commissioners requested the title on the Agenda to include the words Work Session.

A Motion was made by Commissioner Britz and seconded by Commissioner Keranen to approve the Agenda with the one change to the title of the Agenda as presented.

The Motion carried by a voice vote. Ayes 3, Nays 0.

**Public Comments-Agenda Items only \*(5 minute limit):**

None in person or by Microsoft Teams.

**New Business:**

1. Board of Commissioners Work Session

Chairman Tikkanen stated there is a financial discrepancy between Houghton County and the Tri County Public Defenders.

Administrator Rheault stated since October 2024, there is a \$139,634.00 deficit with the Tri County Public Defenders. She provided a handout to everyone showing the invoices Houghton County sent to the Tri County Public Defenders from 1/1/2018-3/31/2025. The audit findings for the period ending September 30, 2023 identified this deficit for the Michigan Indigent Defense Fund. The fund was supposed to be fully funded through the State and local sources. She prepared a Deficit Elimination Plan and submitted it to the State which is required. She met with the Tri County Public Defenders to review the issue. Initially the County assumed that quarterly reports submitted to the MDIC were incorrect and may have excluded attorney expenses.

Administrator Rheault stated that the MDIC conducted a three (3) year analysis, then extended it to a six (6) year review of the fund. It was discovered that Houghton County had not been retaining money in the 260 fund to cover the Tri County Public Defender's expenses. Instead, the local contribution was forwarded directly to the Tri County Public Defenders each year of operation. The State share was forwarded to the Tri County Public Defenders in the initial years of its operation. As a result, all reports from 2018 to 2025 are considered inaccurate due to this situation. The prior years for reporting cannot be reopened, but once the reconciliation is complete, the County will work with MDIC to reopen the FY 2024 reports to recompute the figures and move forward with accurate FY 2025 reporting. Due to these discrepancies, the MDIC grant has been put on "Freeze" meaning the County cannot submit FY 2025 reports or receive state contributions until this issue is resolved. As a result of the "Freeze" the County did not receive the state contributions anticipated in January 2025 and will likely not receive the contributions expected in April 2025. There has been confusion with expenses reimbursements. Since Houghton County received expense reimbursement vouchers from the Tri County Public Defenders, this created confusion. When these findings were brought to the attention of the Tri County Public Defenders, they confirmed that they do not have extra funds in their accounts. The next step should be a deeper review to determine how funds were allocated to ensure compliance with MDIC requirements.

Administrator Rheault stated the County reimbursed expenses between \$30,000 and \$70,000 some months, and some months no money was sent. This started in 2020.

Administrator Rheault handed out a document from Prosecutor Helmer to everyone that answered questions asked by Commissioner Anderson. Prosecutor Helmer did state he recommended reaching out to Attorney Roger Zappa.

At approximately 1:20 p.m., two (2) County employees came to the meeting in person and informed the Board that they could not access Microsoft Teams. The meeting temporarily stopped so Teresa Hill and Administrator Rheault could investigate what happened. Teresa Hill stated the internet was down and Administrator Rheault's previous connection to Microsoft Teams was gone. Laura from Circuit Court left the meeting. Becky from the Prosecutor's Office stayed, and Angela joined the meeting a short time later.

Prosecutor Helmer came to the meeting briefly to discuss Microsoft Teams not working and it being a Open Meetings Act issue since the meeting was posted. He left the meeting to go attend Court hearings.

The Board discussed having monthly work sessions and to possibly look at changing public comments from 5 minutes to 3 minutes.

Chairman Tikkanen stated the work session was resuming at 1:40 p.m.

The Board discussed Administrator Rheault reaching out to Attorney Zappa, and discussed the Tri County Public Defenders only being able to work three (3) weeks, and has no funds. MSP is conducting an investigation on this matter. The Tri County Public Defenders contract expires September 30, 2025.

Administrator Rheault gave a handout to everyone showing the number of cases currently in the Prosecutor's Office and the Tri County Public Defenders. The Tri County Public Defenders currently handles about 65% of the cases. Chairman Tikkanen thanked Prosecutor Helmer for his assistance.

**Public Comment:**

None.

**Announcements:**

Administrator Rheault will contact Attorney Roger Zappa and copy all Commissioners and ask Attorney Zappa to reply to all Commissioners and state the urgency of this matter.

**Adjournment:**

A Motion was made by Commissioner Keranen and seconded by Commissioner Britz to adjourn at 2:15 p.m.

The Motion carried by a voice vote. Ayes 3, Nays 0.

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Tom Tikkanen, Chairman

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Jennifer Kelly, County Clerk