



COUNTY OF SANTA CRUZ

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CARLOS J. PALACIOS, COUNTY ADMINISTRATIVE OFFICER

PRESS RELEASE

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BOARD TO CONSIDER PUBLIC DEFENDER SERVICES

The County of Santa Cruz has begun succession planning for indigent defense services in Santa Cruz County, including exploring the possible creation of a Public Defender's office.

Since 1975, indigent defense for justice-involved individuals has been capably provided by the law firm of Biggam, Christensen & Minsloff. The firm, as well as two conflicts firms, operate under contracts with the County that extend through the 2021-22 fiscal year.

To help develop a succession plan, the County engaged the services of the Sixth Amendment Center (6AC) to provide an independent and objective analysis as well as recommendations for indigent legal services in Santa Cruz County. The initial assessment of existing services and proposed framework for future services will be presented to the Board of Supervisors on Tuesday, Oct. 6, 2020.

"After 40 years, we are beginning a new chapter in legal services for our most vulnerable residents," said Acting County Administrative Officer Nicole Coburn. "We turn this page grateful for the years of service from our contract firms, and knowing we must do our best to fulfill our obligations to criminal defendants under *Gideon v. Wainwright*."

"The right of an indigent person facing the potential loss of liberty in a criminal proceeding to an effective lawyer is all-encompassing, for it affects their ability to assert all other trial rights," said David Carroll, Director of the Sixth Amendment Center. "We are confident that Santa Cruz County is on course to strengthen its indigent defense system, ensuring equal justice for all that comes before the courts."



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Completed in September, the yearlong 6AC assessment consisted of an exhaustive, data-driven analysis of public defender services, court services and operations, court observations, interviews with justice stakeholders and policymakers, and data provided by the public defender firms, Superior Court, and District Attorney's Office.

6AC made several findings, including a need for improved oversight and independence for indigent legal services, the need to move away from flat-fee contracts, excessive caseloads in comparison to national standards, and a lack of investment in indigent defense infrastructure, including technology.

Among the recommendations are to establish the office of the Chief Public Defender, appointed by the Board of Supervisors, and funded at a level that allows appointees to hire staff and promulgate policies that assure conflict-free and effective assistance of counsel for every indigent person in the County.

For a copy of the full report, please visit the Sixth Amendment Center at:
https://sixthamendment.org/6AC/6AC_ca_santacruzcountyreport_2020.pdf

or visit:

https://santacruzcountyca.iqm2.com/Citizens/Detail_Meeting.aspx?ID=1816