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MAKING JUSTICE HAPPEN
San Francisco Public Defender

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Due to Covid-19, Clean Slate drop-in hours have been paused. You can apply for Clean Slate online at sfpublicdefender.org/services/clean-slate

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Dear Community,

As we all know, 2020 was an incredibly difficult year with the continuing COVID-19 pandemic and economic crisis, as well as a national reckoning with racism and police brutality. Amid the sadness and anger, we have also witnessed amazing resilience, even in the most difficult of circumstances. As public defenders, we continued to show up for our clients and communities every day. We advocated for just outcomes in court and for our clients’ wellbeing. Simultaneously, we fought for the larger systemic changes we need for justice and equity to prevail.

As we move into 2021, we offer this calendar memorializing some of our accomplishments and acts of service from 2020. 2021 is an incredibly important year. Not only does it bring with it a sense of hope and possibility for our country, but it also marks the 100th Anniversary of the San Francisco Public Defender’s Office. I am so proud of all of our defenders — our attorneys, clerks, paralegals, investigators, social workers, researchers, and policy advocates — for continuing to carry on the mission of our office with courage, humanity, and integrity.

Sincerely,

Mano Raju
Public Defender of San Francisco
Community Oath of Mano Raju
S.F. Public Defender
Newly sworn-in Public Defender Mano Raju commemorated his inauguration by making an oath to the community at the Black History Month celebration organized by our Racial Justice Committee in February 2020. The Oath was administered by Ms. Gwen Woods — the mother of Mario Woods — who stood flanked by a group of mothers who have all lost children to police and state violence.
Our Racial Justice Committee coordinated with Supervisor Matt Haney’s office to rename the street behind the Public Defender’s Office to "Jeff Adachi Way." The Adachi Family unveiled the new street sign at a community gathering just one year after Jeff’s passing.
In March 2020, two long-time public defenders — Maria Evangelista and Michelle Tong — won their grassroots campaigns to serve as San Francisco Superior Court Judges. Judge Tong and Judge Evangelista were sworn in on January 4, 2021.
Public Defenders immediately responded to the needs and rights of our clients as the COVID-19 pandemic impacted safety and access to courtrooms and jails. Undeterred and determined to protect our clients’ rights, all staff stepped up to adapt to the pressing needs, with great support from our IT team who worked to set up vital communications systems.
As PPE trickled into San Francisco, the community rose to the occasion. Local actor and activist, Jamal Trulove, who was famously convicted and then exonerated for a murder he did not commit, donated enough masks for every person in SF county jail. Public Defender Mano Raju helped coordinate the delivery to the Sheriff’s department.
2020 was defined by the coronavirus yet shaped by the fight for racial justice. After the killing of George Floyd by Minneapolis police, public defenders joined the Black Lives Matter movement in the streets. On June 8th, we coordinated with public defenders across the country, from Boston to Los Angeles, by holding a press conference, vigil, and rally on the steps of the Hall of Justice.
In Summer of 2020, Deputy Public Defender Sierra Villaran (right) and her client’s team, Investigator Collin Olsen (center), Paralegal Sercan Ersoy (left), and Social Worker Nicole Harris (not pictured), rose to the challenge of the first SF jury trial in the time of COVID after trials had been suspended for nearly four months. Together they won protections for their client’s due process, proved to a jury that he was innocent of a burglary, and assisted him in getting the needed support once released after he’d lingered in pretrial detention for nearly a year during a deadly pandemic.
Our newly formed Post-conviction Freedom Project went full force into the Spring of 2020 to assist people in prison and reunite families. We helped 27 people get released after long prison sentences, reducing sentences by a total of 388 years of incarceration and commuting 18 life terms.
Our MAGIC programs in the Bayview-Hunters Point and the Fillmore-Western Addition adapted beautifully to the needs of the youth and families we serve through year-round collaborations with community-based programming. At the annual backpack give-away in 2020, we distributed over 4,500 backpacks and school supplies to local youth to make sure they were equipped for the school year, even as students entered virtual classrooms.
From Day 1 of the pandemic, our Immigration Defense Unit worked around the clock to aggressively protect the lives of immigrants detained in two ICE detention facilities. We filed two major lawsuits as co-counsel, including a class action suit (Zepeda-Rivas v. Jennings) where a federal District Court judge issued a temporary restraining order, creating a bail application process for those trapped inside the dangerous congregate living environments.

Despite the circumstances, we were able to help liberate hundreds of people from immigration detention, depopulating the jails to 15% capacity. We also saw leaders emerge -- including our client Charles Joseph, who recorded a video from inside the Mesa Verde ICE detention facility that was widely circulated and exposed ICE’s dangerous practices.
In 2018, our office advocated in Sacramento to reform California’s felony murder rule. SB 1437 became law in 2019 and our team began to review dozens of old SF cases. Rebecca Young (second from right) is pictured here with her client (center) who — at the age of 19 in 1974 — was forced to plead to a string of robberies, threatened with the death penalty for taking part in a single robbery where someone was killed by a co-defendant, and denied parole 18 times because he continued to tell the truth of his innocence for the murder itself and for the other robberies. With support from Keker Van Nest & Peters attorney, Patrick Murray (right), Rebecca and her team were able to overturn the felony murder conviction and her client was released from prison after 46 years.
In 2020, we welcomed our inaugural cohort of the Young Defenders program - a paid internship for local high school students to learn about the criminal legal system from the unique lens of public defense, and a collaboration between the San Francisco Public Defender’s Office, the San Francisco Human Rights Commission, Opportunities for All, and Teachers for Social Justice. The Young Defenders produced and hosted two virtual and interactive “Know Your Rights” events for the community which are available on YouTube to view and share.