



COUNTY OF SAN DIEGO

AGENDA ITEM

BOARD OF SUPERVISORS

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Second District

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Fourth District

JIM DESMOND
Fifth District

DATE: February 10, 2026

01

TO: Board of Supervisors

SUBJECT

AUTHORIZE A-87 EXEMPTION TO COMPETITIVE PROCUREMENT TO APPROVE PUBLIC DEFENDER CONTRACT WITH PARTNERS FOR JUSTICE AND ESTABLISH APPROPRIATIONS (DISTRICTS: ALL)

OVERVIEW

On February 28, 2023 (6), the San Diego County Board (Board) authorized a single source exemption to competitive procurement for Public Defender (PD) to contract with Partners for Justice (PFJ) for juvenile client advocate services for one year and three option years. The contract was executed effective July 1, 2023 and embedded PFJ client advocates within the Primary Public Defender's Juvenile Justice Unit. On average, approximately 39 juvenile clients and their families receive client advocate services. Services include assistance with long-term housing resources, education support and school enrollment, job training or placement services, benefits enrollment, medical advocacy, access to in-custody services, release planning and more. Due to the positive results this program has achieved in the juvenile justice division, PD requests to expand these services to its adult division, which will lead to better outcomes for clients and their families and increase attorney efficiency.

Prior to the implementation of the program with PFJ, deputy public defenders performed these tasks themselves. Since the implementation of PFJ's client advocate services to PD's juvenile justice division, attorney time spent on support services for clients has decreased, allowing them to focus their time more exclusively on legal work. Today's request includes authorizing the Director of Purchasing and Contracting to enter into a one-year contract with PFJ beginning March 1, 2026 through June 30, 2027 with three option years through 2030 to provide three client advocates to assist PD's adult client program and establish appropriations of \$400,000 from the Opioid Settlement Fund to the Office of the Public Defender, Services & Supplies.

RECOMMENDATION(S)

CHIEF ADMINISTRATIVE OFFICER

1. In accordance with Board Policy A-87 Procedure A.3, approve and authorize the Director of the Department of Purchasing and Contracting to enter into negotiations with Partners for Justice and, subject to successful negotiations and a determination of a fair and reasonable price, award contract for three client advocates to assist PD's adult client program for up to

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one year and three option periods through 2030 and an additional six months if needed, and to amend the contract as needed to reflect changes to requirements and funding.

2. Establish appropriations of \$400,000 from the Opioid Settlement Fund to the Office of the Public Defender, Services & Supplies, for contract for client advocate services and associated technical assistance March 1, 2026 through June 30, 2027. **(4 VOTES)**

EQUITY IMPACT STATEMENT

Today’s action seeks to reduce disparities across the criminal justice system by helping fulfill the needs of the Public Defender’s (PD) indigent clients. A snapshot of the multitude and diverse array of needs experienced by San Diegans that cycle through the legal system is presented in a July 2025 report by the San Diego Association of Governments (SANDAG) titled “2024 Adult Arrestee Drug Use in the San Diego Region”. Per the report, of the adult arrestees surveyed, three in four arrestees tested positive for a substance, including one in two that tested positive for methamphetamine. Additionally, a third of the arrestees reported a mental health diagnosis, and over two-thirds reported having experience with being unhoused.

Client advocates will support PD clients by connecting clients to a network of local services, community organizations, and civil attorneys. They will work with PD’s attorneys to reduce jail time and improve case outcomes, disrupting the cycle of poverty and incarceration. By addressing the non-legal challenges that clients face (i.e. poverty, unemployment, mental health needs, etc.), Client advocates offer the opportunity to restore and heal individuals, engage them with the community, help prevent repeat offenses, and promote justice, both within the legal system and without.

SUSTAINABILITY IMPACT STATEMENT

Part of the role of client advocates is to connect clients with resources to help them sustain themselves during and after experiences with the criminal justice system, as well as to reintegrate themselves back into the community. These resources include community-based social services related to addiction, physical and mental health, housing, employment, education, and finance as well as civil, family, and immigration legal resources. Client advocates will help lift barriers to supportive services caused by limited public awareness and lack of social connectivity.

This program would support the County's Sustainability Goal of providing just and equitable access to County services. Additionally, the program would be an investment in a chronically underserved community and would assist in building the resilience of a vulnerable population. Strengthening resilience is a key sustainability commitment in the County’s current Operational Plan.

FISCAL IMPACT

If approved, this request will establish appropriations totaling \$400,000 in Public Defender for contracted client advocate services and associated technical assistance from March 1, 2026 through June 30, 2027. Current year costs, estimated at \$100,000 have not been budgeted in the Fiscal Year (FY) 2025-26 Operational Plan. Remaining appropriations (\$300,000) to cover

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option years costs for contracted services from July 1, 2026 through June 30, 2027 will be included in the FY 2026-28 CAO Recommended Operational Plan in the Public Defender. The funding source will be the Opioid Settlement Fund. There will be no change in net General Fund cost and no additional staff years.

BUSINESS IMPACT STATEMENT

N/A

ADVISORY BOARD STATEMENT

N/A

BACKGROUND

Public defense can help address the underlying causes of crime and increase public safety. More than 80% of people facing criminal charges depend on public defenders to protect their rights and prevent wrongful convictions and unjustly severe sentences. These defendants disproportionately consist of Black and Brown people, and the penalties they face can be catastrophic. A person's housing, employment, parental rights, and educational options, as well as one's ability to borrow student loans, obtain a professional license, vote, or access public benefits/supports, can all be negatively affected by an arrest alone, let alone a conviction. These adverse impacts can often incentivize criminality rather than enhance public safety. Public defenders, as the resource most proximate to defendants, have significant potential to ameliorate these harms.

On February 28, 2023 (6), the San Diego County Board (Board) authorized a single source exemption to competitive procurement to contract with Partners for Justice (PFJ) for juvenile client advocate services and associated technical assistance. PFJ is an organization which embeds trained peer support advocates in defender organizations to increase connection to substance abuse and mental health treatment and resources, both at the inception of their case as well as after leaving custody. These services have been used to promote restorative justice and address the racial and economic disparities within and resulting from our criminal justice system for our juvenile clients. Depending on client needs, advocates would assist with obtaining mental health and substance abuse treatment, assessing eligibility and enrolling in public benefits, obtaining employment, and accessing emergency housing resources.

On October 25, 2022 (20), the Board adopted the San Diego County Opioid Settlement Framework, which established a trust fund based on funds received as a result of various lawsuits related to the opioid crisis. The Board then adopted an updated version of this framework on October 10, 2023 (13).

Public Defender (PD) seeks to fund this new contract with PFJ using this Opioid Settlement Fund. The proposed contract would align with the following Opioid Settlement Framework priorities:

- Provide comprehensive wrap-around services to individuals with opioid use disorder and any co-occurring substance use/mental health conditions including housing, transportation, education, job placement, job training, and childcare. Provide community support services,

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including social and legal services, to assist in deinstitutionalizing persons with opioid use disorder and any co-occurring substance use/mental health conditions. Expand warm hand-off services to transition to recovery services;

- Provide comprehensive wrap-around services to individuals in recovery, including housing, transportation, job placement/training, and childcare.

In the juvenile division, PFJ's client advocates fulfilled up to seven of each client's identified service needs. According to PFJ's 2024 annual report, client advocates met all of a client's service goals 80% of the time.

This procurement qualifies as a single source under A-87.3.A1 Unique Capability due to PFJ's unique knowledge, skills and abilities. PFJ holds unique expertise that will be essential for the success of this project. As a non-profit organization exclusively focused on supporting public defenders, PFJ client advocates are embedded in 22 public defense agencies nationwide. It has extensive experience recruiting, training, onboarding, and managing client advocates within the public defense context, including in statewide public defense systems. Client advocates are also trained using approaches developed by PFJ and grounded in its collaborative defense methodology. Finally, PFJ's national staff are especially qualified based on the depth and breadth of its combined experience. The PFJ team holds decades of experience in public defense, practicing across multiple states. PFJ's staff also includes social workers, civil attorneys, project managers, data analysts, and more. This combination of deep public defense experience with interdisciplinary skills is both unique in the field and essential to engage in interdisciplinary work in indigent defense.

Based on a market scan of online searches, PFJ is the only known contractor offering staff specifically trained to deliver person-to-person wraparound services and legal mitigation inside public defender offices. Other providers may offer case manager staffing, but case managers do not offer the full range of services that PFJ client advocates provide. Specifically, traditional case managers are not versed in identifying and addressing the enmeshed penalties of arrest that arise in the civil, family, and immigration realms. They are also not trained to provide proactive written mitigation that public defense attorneys can use to support legal arguments and achieve improved case resolutions. PFJ client advocates are able to provide a robust suite of services due to the specialized training that client advocates receive, and which is critical for work in a legal environment. PFJ Advocates participate in six months of intensive training after beginning employment, including topics such as criminal procedure, legal ethics, deep dives on different areas of enmeshed penalties, oral advocacy, mitigation, and persuasive writing. While other providers may offer training and technical assistance to public defenders, these organizations do not offer staffing services of the kind required for this project. PFJ is unique in offering both staffing that is tailored to the needs of public defenders and a comprehensive training program to prepare client advocates for their uniquely robust role.

It also qualifies under A-87.3.A. Continuity, as the Public Defender is in its third contract year with PFJ to provide client advocates for its juvenile clients. This contract would expand services to the Public Defender's adult clients. Awarding this contract to PFJ would allow the Public

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Defender an opportunity to benefit from efficiency and PFJ's critical knowledge of the Public Defender's operations and network of resources available in San Diego County.

Prior to the implementation of the PFJ advocates, deputy public defenders within the juvenile justice unit performed these tasks themselves. Since the introduction of PFJ's client advocates, attorney time spent on support services for clients has decreased, allowing them to focus their time more exclusively on legal work. The expectation is that these positive results, including better outcomes for clients and their families and increased attorney efficiency will be replicated in adult indigent defense. If approved, up to three PFJ Client Advocates would be embedded within the Primary Public Defender's to provide services to adult clients. Upon referral from deputy public defenders, client advocates will assess clients for service needs, identify service goals and work with clients to achieve them. Service goals include, but are not limited to, assistance with obtaining identification cards, long-term housing resources, education support and enrollment in school, job training or placement services, benefits enrollment, medical advocacy, access to in-custody services, release planning and more.

Today's request includes authorizing the Director of Purchasing and Contracting to enter into a one-year contract with PFJ beginning March 1, 2026 through June 20, 2027 with three option years through 2030 to provide three client advocates to assist PD's adult client program and transfer appropriations of approximately \$400,000 from the Opioid Settlement Fund to the Office of the Public Defender, Services and Supplies.

LINKAGE TO THE COUNTY OF SAN DIEGO STRATEGIC PLAN

Today's proposed action to contract with Partners for Justice for client advocates supports the Justice Strategic Initiative in the County of San Diego's 2026-2031 Strategic Plan by helping reduce criminal justice disparities and promote restorative justice by providing our low-income clients with opportunities to contribute to the community.

Respectfully submitted,



Andrew Strong for

EBONY N. SHELTON
Chief Administrative Officer

ATTACHMENT(S)

N/A