



League of United Latin American Citizens
SAN BENITO COUNTY
COUNCIL 2890
*Established 1987 in Hollister, California
Celebrating 36 Years of Service*

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Advocating for a Public Defender's Office in San Benito County: A Call for Justice and Equity

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San Benito County is facing significant challenges in its legal representation for indigent clients, with glaring issues in the current contract system. This includes low rates of litigation, minimal jury trials and lack of motions to suppress evidence – all of which raise ethical and procedural concerns. (see the full report: <https://shorturl.at/WWK2f>)

The inadequacies in San Benito County's legal representation for indigent individuals are glaring and demand immediate action. The lack of structured oversight and accountability highlight the need for a Public Defender's Office to ensure fair and effective representation and provide structured oversight and continuity.

With the Latino community comprising a significant portion of our county population, the disparities and injustices faced by Latinos demand urgent action. Establishing a Public Defender's Office will not only address systemic inequalities but also provide transparency and ethical standards in legal services.

The League of United Latin American Citizens (LULAC), the oldest and widely respected Hispanic Civil Rights organization in the United States, firmly advocates for the establishment of a Public Defender's Office in San Benito County. With a population of over 67,000 residents, including a Latino community comprising 62% of the population, the need for a dedicated Public Defender's Office is more pressing than ever. The current system, which contracts with a private, for-profit law firm, lacks transparency, accountability, and consistency in legal representation. This decentralized model not only comes at a significant cost to the county but also fails to address the changing demographics and increasing needs of the community.

The current contract system for indigent defense is failing our community. The lack of effective and consistent representation is an indication of the system's shortcomings. This issue extends beyond legal matters; it is a matter of racial inequality that must be addressed. **We cannot have one system for the wealthy and another for the poor.** It is unjust and perpetuates further injustices.

To achieve this, we recommend three key steps:

1. Invest in a Public Defender's Office with the creation of a managed assigned counsel system, along with a reevaluation of attorney compensation that will help attract and retain quality defense attorneys dedicated to providing ethical representation.
2. Partner with neighboring counties, like Santa Cruz who is in the process of setting up their own county Public Defender's Office.
3. Establish an Oversight Task Force with diverse representation to guide the establishment of a Public Defender's Office that truly serves the community's needs that includes: LULAC, Youth Alliance, the County Probation Department, County and City officials, and community members who have been adversely affected by the current system.

LULAC stands in solidarity with those who are fighting for justice and equity. We call on the County Board of Supervisors to take action, to invest in a Public Defenders office that will bring positive change to our legal system and address the injustices faced by our Latino community members, establish an Oversight Task Force that will provide the necessary guidance to ensure that a Public Defenders office is established that truly serves the needs of our community. It is time to prioritize fair and effective legal representation for all residents, regardless of their socioeconomic status. Let us work together to build a more just and equitable future for San Benito County.

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