



County of Santa Cruz

COUNTY BOARD OF SUPERVISORS

701 OCEAN STREET, SUITE 520, SANTA CRUZ, CA 95060-4073

May 5, 2025

Senator Mike McGuire
President pro Tempore, State Senate
1021 O Street, Suite 8518
Sacramento, CA 95814

Assemblymember Robert Rivas
Speaker of the Assembly
1021 O Street, Suite 8330
Sacramento, CA 95814

Senator Scott Wiener
Chair, Senate Committee on Budget
1021 O Street, Suite 8620
Sacramento, CA 95814

Honorable Jesse Gabriel
Chair, Assembly Committee on Budget
1021 O Street, Suite 8230
Sacramento, CA 95814

Senator Laura Richardson
Chair, Senate Budget Subcommittee No. 5
1021 O Street, Suite 7340
Sacramento, CA 95814

Assemblymember James Ramos
Chair, Assembly Budget Subcommittee No. 6 on Public Safety
1021 O Suite, Suite 8310
Sacramento, CA 95814

Re: Funding Request for Holistic Defense Services for Indigent Defense Providers

Dear Senate and Assembly Leaders:

On behalf of the Santa Cruz County Board of Supervisors, I am writing to join with the California Public Defender's Association and Smart Justice California to respectfully request \$120 million over 3 years to support indigent defense providers across California in implementing holistic defense services. This investment would enhance the ability of indigent defense providers to address the complex enmeshed legal, social, and economic issues faced by their clients. This funding is critical in the wake of Proposition 36, in which voters expressed their intent to have individuals in the criminal legal system receive treatment and housing so as to reduce future contacts with the system.

Background

Holistic defense integrates legal advocacy with comprehensive support services to address the underlying causes of criminal legal system involvement, including poverty, homelessness, and untreated behavioral health needs, and to support clients' re-entry needs, including housing and employment, so as to reduce recidivism.

Studies from jurisdictions that have adopted holistic defense models show significant improvements in outcomes for clients and public safety, including:

- Reduced rates of recidivism.¹
- Shortened pretrial detention periods.²
- Enhanced access to housing, employment, and treatment services.³⁴
- Long-term cost savings for the criminal justice system.⁵

Proposed Use of Funds

The requested \$120 million will be allocated to indigent defense providers to:

1. Support the hiring of social workers, mental health professionals, housing specialists, and other front-line staff with experience or training in holistic defense to form holistic defense teams to serve clients;
2. Fund the establishment of pilot programs and the expansion of existing holistic defense initiatives in under-resourced regions and high income-disparity regions;
3. Provide specialized training for defense attorneys and interdisciplinary staff to implement best practices in holistic defense;
4. Support robust data collection and independent evaluation of the impact of holistic defense services on client outcomes and public safety.

We propose that the \$120 million be appropriated in this year's budget and distributed as grants to be used over three years, prioritizing indigent defense offices with high indigent caseloads, limited access to existing holistic services, or high-income disparity regions. Such an investment would represent a critical step toward ensuring equitable access to justice for all Californians, regardless of income and would:

- Improve public safety through reducing recidivism;
- Improve client outcomes;
- Create long-term cost savings by addressing the root causes of criminal legal system involvement;
- Effectuate the voters' intent in Proposition 36 to have people receive treatment, housing, and reduce recidivism.

¹ [RAND study finds that Bronx Defenders' holistic defense saved clients 1.1 million days behind bars](#)

² [The Effects of Holistic Defense on Criminal Justice Outcomes](#)

³ [James M. Anderson, Maya Buenaventura and Paul Heaton, *The effects of holistic defense on criminal justice outcomes*, Vol. 132, No. 3\(Harvard Law Review January 2019\)](#)

⁴ [Public defenders can open the door to health services | Vera Institute](#)

⁵ Fn. 1; 3, 4.

For further details, please contact: Rebecca Marcus, California Public Defenders Association rebecca@gsadvocacygroup.com, or Natasha Minsker, Smart Justice California, natasha.minsker@gmail.com Thank you for your attention to this important matter.

Sincerely,

Felipe Hernandez, Chair