

The Delray Democrat

Why Public Defense Matters . . . for Everyone¹

Daniel Eisenger

The majority of Americans will likely never need a Public Defender. Their family and friends may never need a Public Defender. They may go the entire lives never having to personally interact with the criminal justice system, except perhaps every few years when they get called to jury duty. Indeed, many people hear “Public Defender” and mistakenly think it is the prosecuting agency “defending the public.”

To the contrary, the Public Defender is the lawyer elected by the public to defend poor people accused by the government of committing a crime who cannot afford to hire a lawyer to represent them in court. The Public Defender is the constitutional officer who makes sure poor people have the same rights as wealthy people when they are brought into court. The Public Defender is the guarantee of equal justice for all.

I am running to be Palm Beach County’s next elected Public Defender because the criminal justice system falls apart without a strong, experienced Public Defender to make sure that all people are treated with equal justice under the law. I am committed to continuing the exceptional work of my boss and mentor, current Public Defender Carey Haughwout, in crafting one of the most highly-respected Public Defender offices in the country. As a life-long Palm Beach County resident, I want to give my personal pledge to ensure equal justice for all in our community as your next Public Defender.

Justice has many facets. It can mean punishment by incarceration for some. But it also means setting people up for successful reentry into the community after they get released from incarceration. To that end, in my current role as Chief Assistant Public Defender I assisted our office’s collaboration to set up a reentry program for Palm Beach County residents returning to the community after having served their time. At the Florida Department of Corrections’ Sago Palm Re-Entry Center, we have clients participating in academic and literacy programs, vocational training, work-release, family re-integration programs, and victim impact engagement. Our communities are safer when formerly incarcerated people can successfully reintegrate into the community and with the tools to help them not reoffend.

Justice can mean mentally ill defendants receive mental health services instead of punitive incarceration because, without a doubt, our communities are safer when our most vulnerable citizens are healthy and functional. According to Sheriff Ric Bradshaw the county jail is the largest mental health provider in Palm Beach County. Often these defendants are arrested for low-level, non-violent offenses, such as trespassing on property or disorderly conduct.

In the jail setting, these inmates are warehoused indefinitely with little to no meaningful treatment while their cases drag on because they are too mentally ill to resolve the case. I spearheaded an

¹ [The Delray Democrat](#), February-March 2024, page 3.

initiative with the courts and the State Attorney's Office that addresses this problem in a safe, economical way by creating a misdemeanor mental health court where these low-level offenders can receive treatment and other social services in a setting that gets them out of the jail and ensures they have a carefully laid-out plan to follow to resolve their cases.

Justice also means that everyone accused of a crime has a right to receive due process of law with the assistance of an effective lawyer and advocate. To realize the guarantee of equal justice, the Palm Beach County Public Defender's office has concentrated its efforts on providing its lawyers and staff with high-quality training on every aspect of defense representation, from trial practice skills to legal theory to forensic science.

We pride ourselves on being a training ground for new lawyers looking to hone their legal skills, and we recruit new hires with a range of diverse backgrounds and experiences from all over the country, as well as from our own community. As the Chief Assistant, I feel it is important to lead by example, and I am in the courtroom every day representing clients, trying cases, and teaching younger lawyers what it means to be a Public Defender.

While the majority of Americans may never need a Public Defender for themselves or their loved ones, our community depends upon a functioning criminal justice system. The criminal justice system depends, in turn, upon an experienced Public Defender to ensure equal justice for all the people in our community.

I am asking to be your next elected Public Defender for Palm Beach County.