



San Francisco

Sheriff's Office



Prisoner Legal Services Overview and Update Sheriff's Oversight Board

January 9, 2026





Presentation Roadmap

- **Overview of Prisoner Legal Services (PLS) for New Board Members: Foundations, Mission, Placement in Organizational Structure, The PLS Team**
- **What PLS Does – Services to the Department and Community; Services to the Incarcerated Population**
- **New Leadership Priorities**
- **Questions & Discussion**



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Foundations of Prisoner Legal Services (1974-1979)

1975

Michael Hennessey establishes "San Francisco County Jail Prisoner Legal Assistance" and recruits law students to help from New College School of Law to provide services.

1979

Michael Hennessey is elected Sheriff, secures funding for a budgeted attorney position and formally establishes *Prisoner Legal Services*. Stephen Greenberg is hired as the first PLS Directing Attorney.

1974

SFSD Chief of Staff Raymond Towbis hires Vista lawyer Michael Hennessey to provide legal information and assistance to the incarcerated population in San Francisco County Jails.

1977

Bounds v. Smith: The U.S. Supreme Court holds that incarcerated people have a constitutional right of access to the courts, requiring adequate law libraries or legal assistance. In San Francisco County Jails, PLS is charged with fulfilling this mandate.



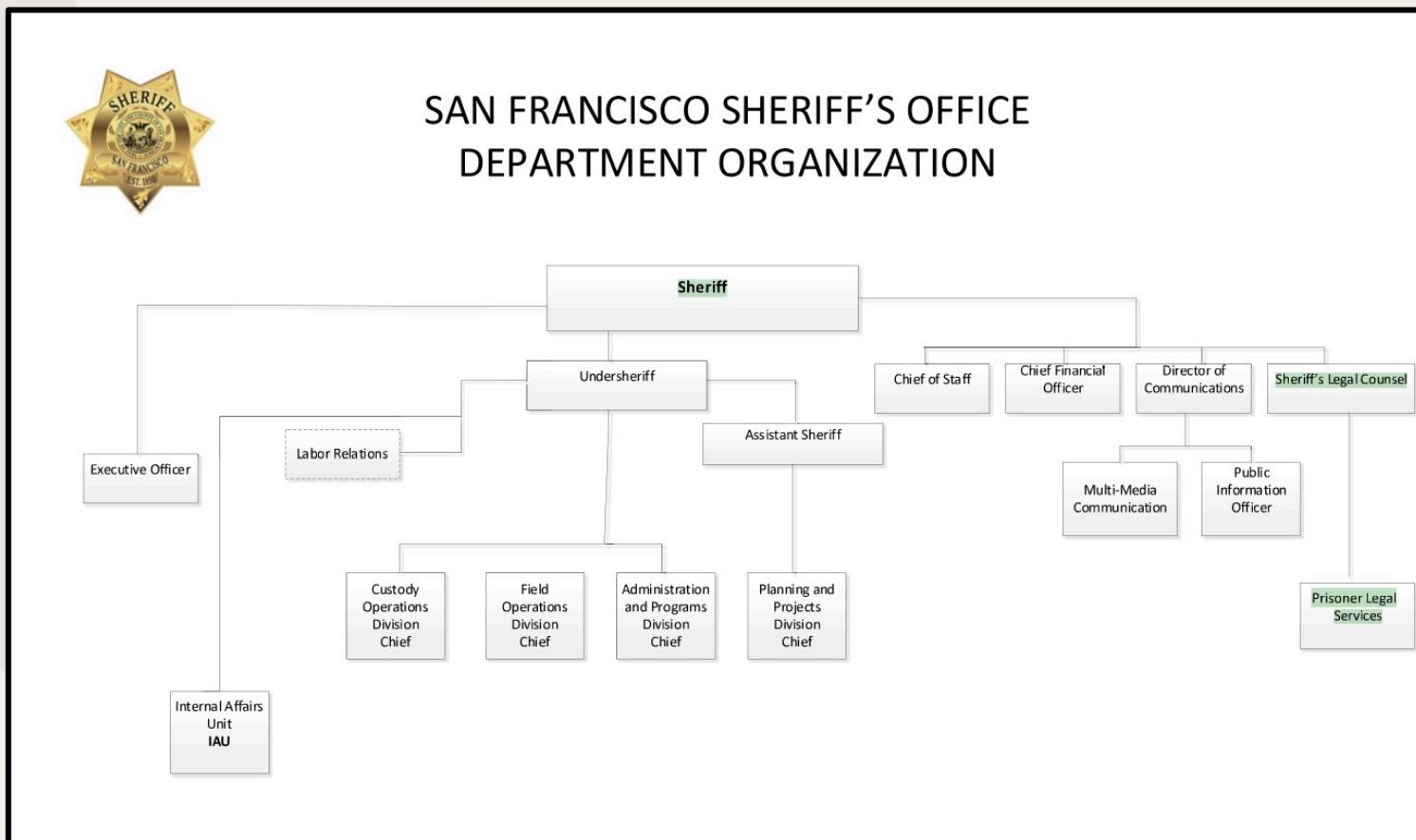
Framing the Mission – Why PLS Exists

- To assist the Sheriff's Office in its commitment to meet or exceed federal, state, and local law governing the housing and treatment of incarcerated persons.
- To provide incarcerated persons with the information and direct assistance they need to access the courts, resolve problems related to their incarceration, and mitigate barriers to reentry.



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Where PLS Fits In





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The PLS Team



Melinda Benson



Asia Harrigan



Ruby Lee



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What PLS Does – Supporting the Department, Administration, and Community

- **Submit reports** on jail practices and conditions, including audits, complaints, and analysis of PLS services.
- **Review and provide comment** on draft Department policies
- **Provide trainings/presentations** related to the role and duties of PLS
- **Maintain an internship program** for law students and undergraduates
- **Act as liaison** to defense bar and justice partners



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Focus on Internship Program: Mentoring Future Justice Professionals
110 Student Interns Mentored in 2025!

Interns on PLS



[Jacob Wilson, Summer 2025](#)



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Focus on Justice Partner Support: Strengthening Collaboration With Courts, Counsel, and Community Partners

"Prisoner Legal Services has been a critical lifeline for both our clients and our staff. Their team is consistently responsive, hardworking, and deeply thoughtful in following up with relevant Sheriff's staff to address a wide range of urgent needs — including access to medical care, jail conditions, transportation to court, and legal visits.

They serve as a vital bridge for our clients and their loved ones, helping them navigate the jail system and secure the care and support they deserve. We are profoundly grateful for the dedication of Melinda, Asia, and Ruby, who comprise the Prisoner Legal Services team."

- San Francisco Public Defender's Office

"We collaborate with Prisoner Legal Services (PLS) to provide voting opportunities to eligible justice-involved individuals in San Francisco. For many elections, PLS has conducted voter registration drives, provided accurate and accessible voting information, and distributed election materials to individuals in custody. We maintain close coordination with PLS throughout each election to ensure timely delivery of voting materials and uphold the voting rights of all eligible individuals in local jails. This partnership has played a vital role in expanding civic participation and ensuring that justice-involved San Franciscans may exercise their voting rights." — John Arntz, Director, San Francisco Department of Elections

"Prisoner Legal Services reaches out to EDC whenever they are made aware of an incarcerated person whose tenancy is being terminated. This enables us to provide the representation mandated by the voters of San Francisco in passing Proposition F and thereby prevent what would otherwise likely result in the entry of a default judgment and displacement of a low-income tenant. During the period of our legal representation, EDC relies heavily on the support of PLS. They assist us in maintaining communication with clients who are incarcerated, completing legal documents and obtaining client signatures, and arranging for attorney jail visits and remote court appearances." — Ora S. Prochovnick, Director of Litigation and Policy, Eviction Defense Collaborative

"We are incredibly grateful for PLS—we could not possibly manage or navigate the seizure process with incarcerated [pet] owners without their assistance." — Animal Care and Control Captain Rebecca Fenson



What PLS Does – Serving the Incarcerated Population

PLS provides direct legal and administrative support to incarcerated persons, helping them access the courts, navigate daily challenges, and prepare for successful reentry.

Access to Court Services

- Provision of Legal Research Materials, Forms and Filings, Pro Per Support, Facilitate Right to Correspond with Legal Representatives, Court/Other Representatives

Problem Solving in Custody

- Support Administrative Solutions to Day-to-Day Issues in Jail

Reentry Support

- Mitigate Barriers to Successful Reentry by Providing Assistance With Preservation of Housing, Family and Caregiving, Release Date Problems, Incarcerated Voter Services, Financial and Property Matters, Referrals, and More



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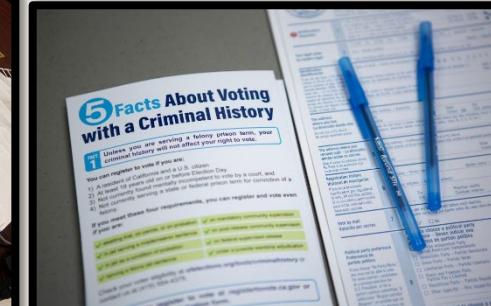
Focus on Voting: Ensuring Access to the Franchise for Eligible Incarcerated Voters

In 2003, PLS implemented a first-of-its-kind voter outreach program in a California county jail.

In close partnership with the San Francisco Department of Elections we have since provided voter services to tens of thousands of eligible incarcerated voters.

In the last election, we provided voter outreach services to 664 incarcerated voters.

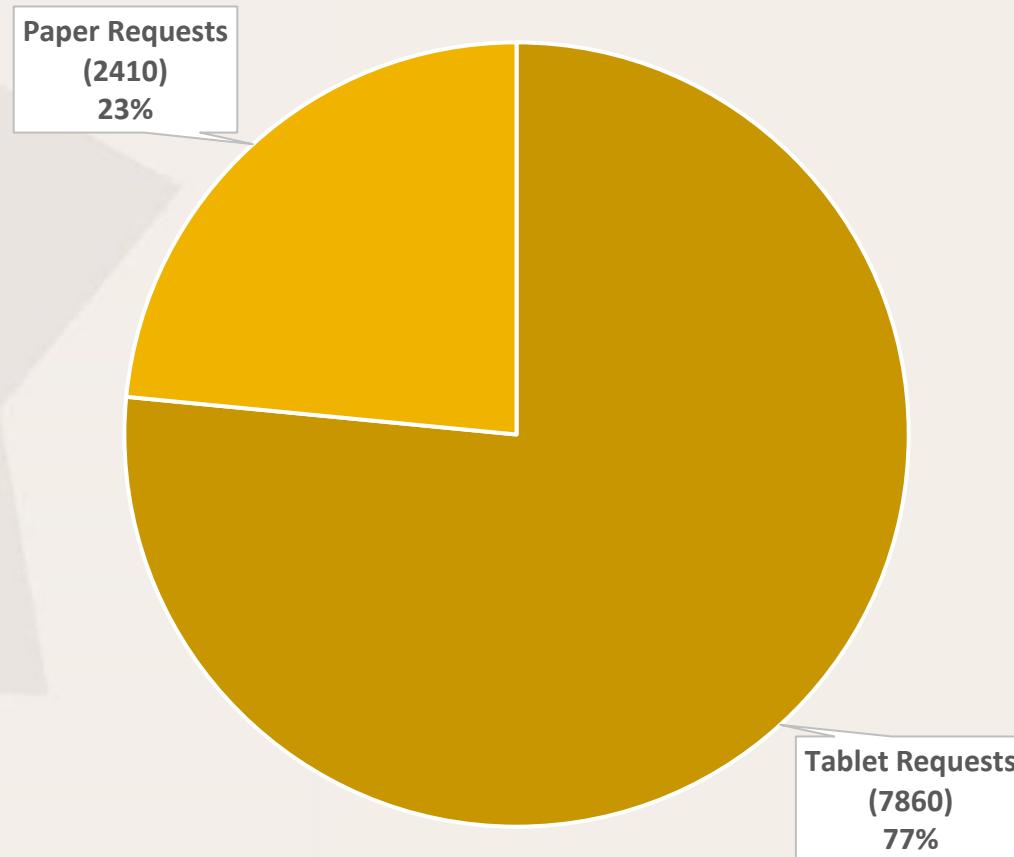
Our program is a model for other jurisdictions across the state and nation.





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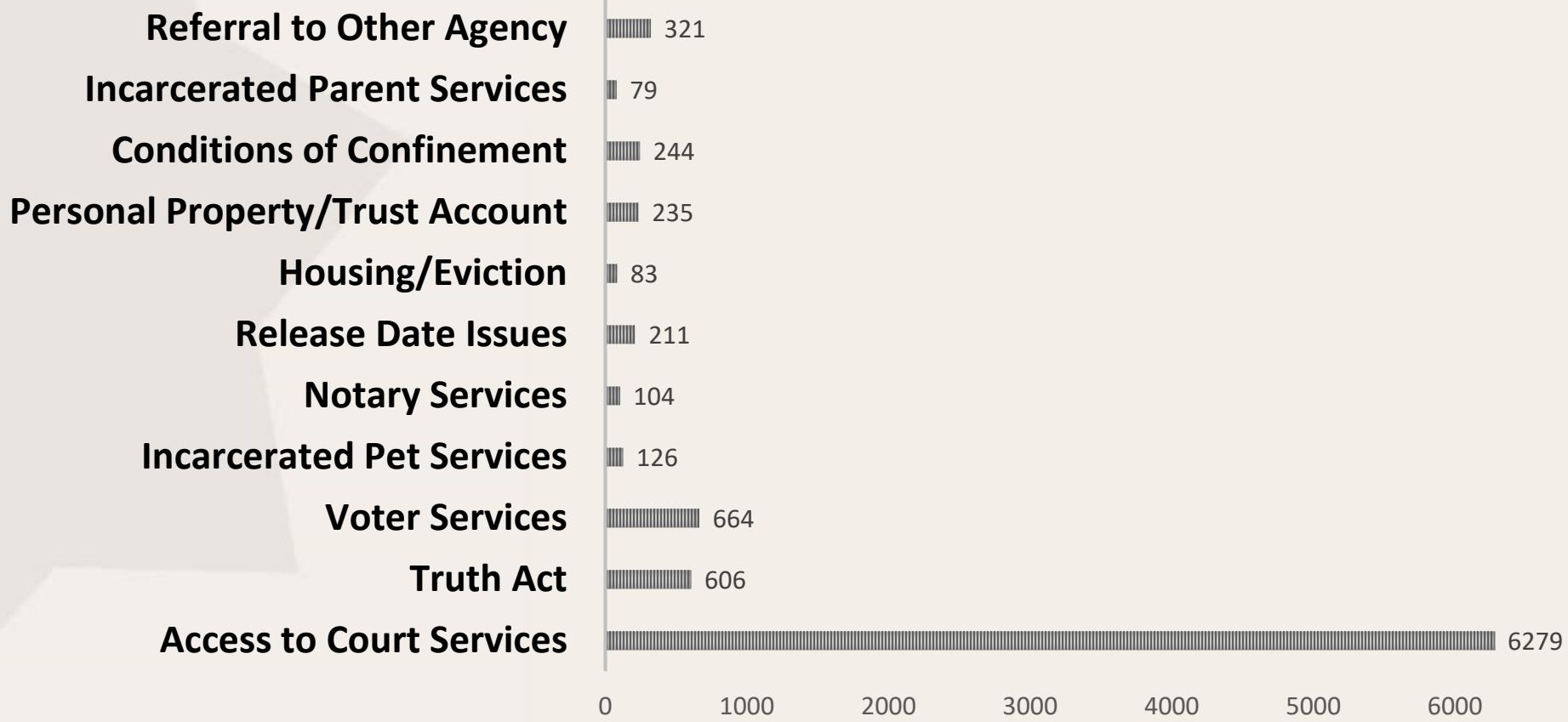
In 2025 PLS Processed 10,458 Requests For Assistance From Incarcerated Persons





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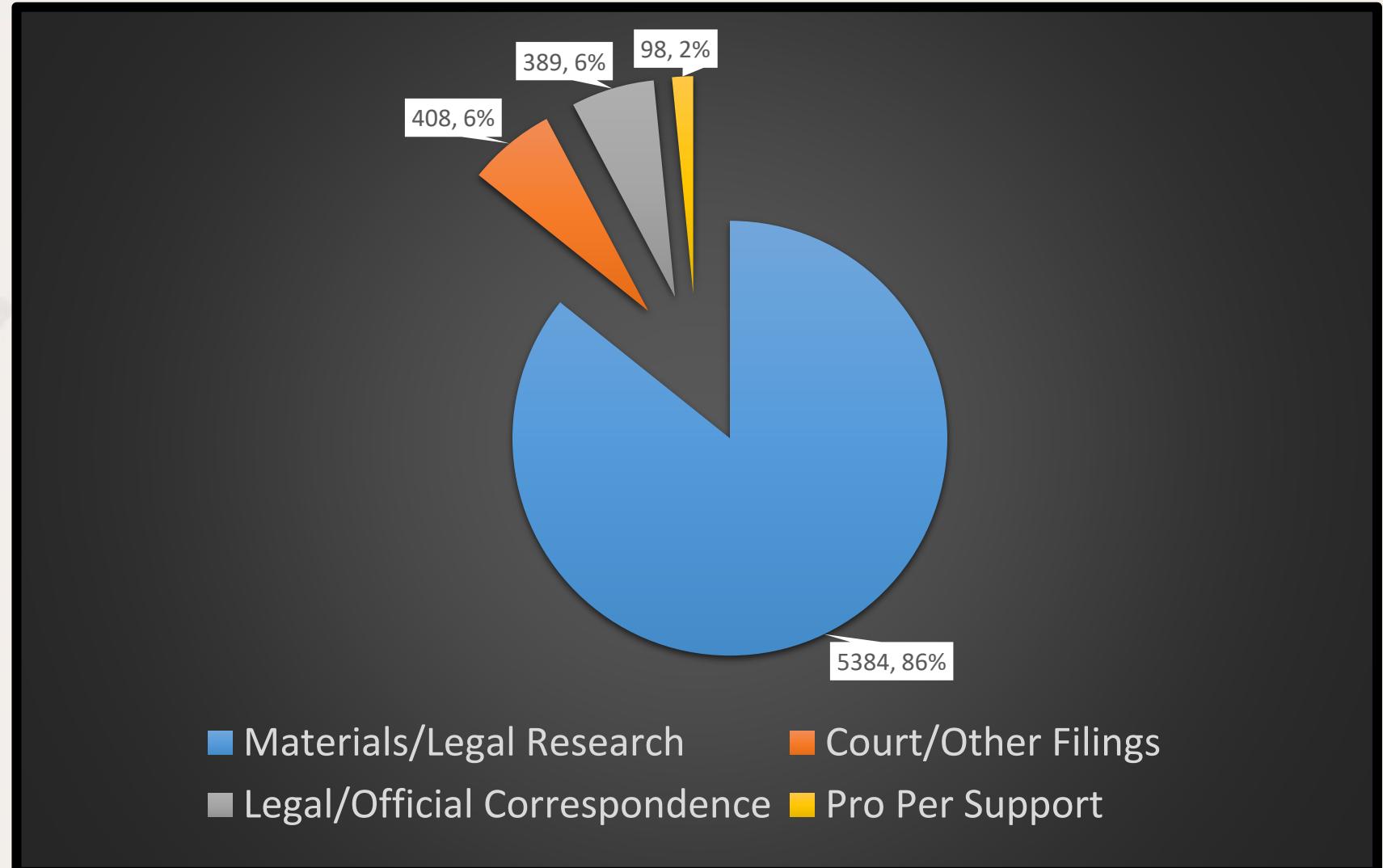
2025 DIRECT SERVICES BREAKDOWN





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Breakdown of Access to Court Services Provided in 2025



Incarcerated Persons on PLS





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New PLS Leadership



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INTER-OFFICE CORRESPONDENCE

July 18, 2024
Ref: PM 2024-096

To: All Personnel

From: Sheriff Paul Miyamoto

Re: Director of Prisoner Legal Services Melinda Benson

Please join me in congratulating Melinda Benson on her promotion to Director of Prisoner Legal Services (PLS),

Melinda brings 30 years of experience working with incarcerated populations, with nearly 24 of those years dedicated to PLS. Throughout her tenure at PLS, she has made significant contributions to the San Francisco Sheriff's Office (SFSO), including the development of the SFSO's Incarcerated Voter Program. This program serves as a model for jurisdictions aiming to ensure that eligible incarcerated individuals have a meaningful opportunity to vote.



Over the years, she has helped to develop many SFSO policies and procedures that concern conditions of confinement for people incarcerated in the San Francisco county jails, including the policy that formalized the role of PLS within the SFSO, the only agency of its kind in California. Melinda has also greatly expanded PLS's legal internship program, forging partnerships with pro bono programs at Bay Area law schools and mentoring hundreds of law students interested in the criminal justice system.

As the Director of PLS, Melinda supports the SFSO in its commitment to meeting or exceeding all legal and regulatory standards governing conditions of confinement.

She holds a bachelor's degree in sociology with a minor in criminal justice from San Francisco State University and a JD from Golden Gate University School of Law. Melinda lives in the City with her husband and son.



My Priorities

Modernization	Building systems that improve access, responsiveness, and service delivery
Communication	Fostering strong, consistent, cooperative communication across the Department
Partnerships	Deepening collaboration with justice and city partners
Accountability	Using data to strengthen transparency and public trust
Sustaining PLS	Ensuring Prisoner Legal Services remains strong, effective, and relevant for years to come.



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Questions & Discussion