



COUNTY OF SONOMA

575 ADMINISTRATION
DRIVE, ROOM 102A
SANTA ROSA, CA 95403

SUMMARY REPORT

Agenda Date: 4/7/2026

To: Sonoma County Board of Supervisors
Department or Agency Name(s): Public Defender's Office
Staff Name and Phone Number: Brian Morris, 565-3876
Vote Requirement: 4/5th
Supervisorial District(s): Countywide

Title:

Expanded Public Defense Services Grant

Recommended Action:

- 1) Adopt a resolution accepting the terms and conditions of grant funding from the Office of State Public Defender in the amount of \$849,999 for a term of February 1, 2026, through June 1, 2028 (Majority Vote)
- 2) Adopt a resolution authorizing budgetary adjustments to the FY 2025-2026 Public Defender's adopted budget to add revenue and expenditure appropriations totaling \$137,250 to cover costs associated with the grant program (4/5th Vote)
- 3) Adopt a resolution to amend the Department Allocation List of the Public Defender's Department, effective April 7, 2026.

Executive Summary:

The Sonoma County Public Defender's Office has been awarded \$849,999 in grant funding from the Office of the State Public Defender to establish and operate an Early Representation Unit (ERU). The ERU will aim to provide timely, holistic legal representation within 24 hours of booking for individuals in custody who experience mental illness, substance use disorders, or housing instability.

Discussion:

The Sonoma County Public Defender's Office proposes to launch an Early Representation Unit (ERU) to address urgent gaps in early-stage legal intervention for individuals booked into the county jail who experience mental illness, substance use disorders, or housing instability. These individuals are disproportionately affected by pretrial incarceration which often leads to worsened legal outcomes and destabilization in nearly every area of life, including housing, employment, treatment continuity, and family relationships.

Currently, individuals who cannot afford private counsel or post bail frequently wait several days in custody before meeting with a public defender. During this critical period, there is no legal advocacy to assess eligibility for diversion, request release, or connect clients to stabilizing services. Even short periods of incarceration can trigger job loss, eviction, treatment disruption, and family separation.

The ERU will aim to intervene within 24 hours of booking during business hours, providing immediate legal representation and advocacy for release or diversion. The unit will also coordinate with behavioral health, housing, and community-based providers to connect clients with treatment and support services. This approach aligns with the Office of State Public Defender's statewide vision for holistic defense and Sonoma

County's commitment to equity and efficiency in the justice system.

Program Objectives:

- Reduce unnecessary pretrial detention for individuals whose incarceration is driven by behavioral health or housing instability
- Increase diversion placements and connections to treatment and supportive housing
- Improve long term client stability through coordinated reentry planning
- Generate data demonstrating efficiency and cost effectiveness of early representation

The ERU will collaborate with the Sheriff's Office, Probation, Behavioral Health Division, Housing and Homeless Services, and local nonprofits to ensure integrated service delivery. A local advisory committee, including justice partners and individuals with lived experience, will meet quarterly to review performance data and ensure equitable outcomes.

By embedding early representation into Sonoma County's continuum of care, the ERU will become a crucial component of the local public defense model. This initiative represents an innovative, sustainable expansion of holistic defense that promotes fairness, equity, and transformative public defense.

To implement the Early Representation Unit, the Public Defender's Office will rely on two existing limited-term positions: a 1.0 FTE deputy public defender IV and a 1.0 FTE administrative aide.

The deputy public defender position will provide legal representation to clients identified through this program, while the administrative aide will provide essential administrative support. These positions were originally funded under the Edward Byrne Justice Assistance Grant (JAG) which expires on June 30, 2026. These positions currently ending on June 30, 2026, fulfilled different roles: the attorney position was focused on mental health cases and the administrative aide was assisting clients regain their driving privileges. With funding through the Expanded Public Defense Services Grant, the Public Defender's Office will extend these positions to June 30, 2027, whereupon the department will evaluate the program and extend the position again if needed.

Racial Equity:

Was this item identified as an opportunity to apply the Racial Equity Toolkit?

No

INSTRUCTIONS: If 'Yes' to the above, or if equity analysis was conducted, include requisite information in this section staff's discussion, findings, and recommendations as it directly relates to this item's requested action(s).

Prior Board Actions:

None.

FISCAL SUMMARY

Expenditures	FY25-26 Adopted	FY26-27 Projected	FY27-28 Projected
Budgeted Expenses	137,250	428,600	284,149
Additional Appropriation Requested			
Total Expenditures	137,250	428,600	284,149
Funding Sources			
General Fund/WA GF			
State/Federal	137,250		
Fees/Other		428,600	284,149
Use of Fund Balance			
General Fund Contingencies			
Total Sources	137,250	428,600	284,149

Narrative Explanation of Fiscal Impacts:

The Office of State Public Defender grant provides \$849,999 to support the Early Representation Unit from February 1, 2026, through June 1, 2028. Grant funds will be allocated across three fiscal years.

All costs associated with this program will be supported with grant funds, with no impact to the County General Fund. There is no local match required.

Staffing Impacts:			
Position Title (Payroll Classification)	Monthly Salary Range (A-I Step)	Additions (Number)	Deletions (Number)

Narrative Explanation of Staffing Impacts (If Required):

Extending 1.0 FTE Time-Limited Deputy Public Defender and 1.0 Administrative Aide - Project will establish the Early Representation Unit by leveraging staff already familiar with Sonoma County’s public defense system and operational processes. This continuity of institutional knowledge will accelerate program implementation and ensure integration with existing workflows.

Both positions are fully funded by the Office of State Public Defender grant, remain time-limited, and have no impact on the County General Fund.

Attachments:

- Attachment 1 - Grant Agreement
- Attachment 2 - Budget Resolution
- Attachment 3 - Position Resolution
- Attachment 4 - Grant Resolution

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Related Items “On File” with the Clerk of the Board:

None.