

# Jackie Lacey

District Attorney  
<http://da.lacounty.gov>



**REMARKS BY LOS ANGELES COUNTY  
DISTRICT ATTORNEY JACKIE LACEY  
MENTAL HEALTH DIVISION NEWS CONFERENCE  
WEDNESDAY, JANUARY 23, 2019**

As many of you know, one of my top priorities is working to improve how the criminal justice system interacts with people living with mental illness.

Today, I'm proud to announce the establishment of the Mental Health Division within my office. It is the first of its kind in a prosecutor's office in California and, possibly, in the nation.

Our goal is to protect the public and to assist people in getting the mental health and other services they need to be healthy members of our community. We also want to make sure that jails and prisons are reserved for the most serious and violent offenders.

The new division underscores my commitment to innovative justice. Over the past six years, my office has embraced novel approaches to helping those with mental health issues in the criminal justice system. I am fortunate to have the support of so many people as we tackle this important public safety issue. Many of them are here with me today.

I want to acknowledge:

- Los Angeles County Supervisors Hilda Solis, Janice Hahn and Kathryn Barger. As well as thank Supervisors Kuehl and Ridley-Thomas who are not here today.
- Judge Sam Ohta, Supervising Judge of the Criminal Division
- Judge Sergio Tapia II, Assistant Supervising Judge of the Criminal Division
- Sheriff Alex Villanueva
- Los Angeles Police Chief Michel Moore
- Redondo Beach Police Chief Keith Kauffman, who represents the Los Angeles County Police Chiefs' Association
- Public Defender Ricardo Garcia
- Erika Anzoategui, Chief Deputy in the Alternate Public Defender's Office

- Chief Probation Officer Terri McDonald
- Judge Peter Espinoza, who is director of the County Office of Diversion and Re-entry
- Dr. Jonathan Sherin, director of the county Department of Mental Health
- Dr. Mark Ghaly, Director of the CEO's Office of Health and Social Impact.
- Mark Gale and Brittney Weissman with the National Alliance on Mental Illness
- Sandy Jo MacArthur, my Mental Health Training Coordinator
- Gilbert Wright, the head deputy district attorney of my new Mental Health Division

Thank you all for your support. Your presence reflects the spirit of collaboration that has resulted in so many positive changes in Los Angeles County's criminal justice system over the past several years.

My new Mental Health Division brings together prosecutors whose cases involve defendants who have been declared incompetent to stand trial or are seeking alternative sentences due to their mental illness. The deputy district attorneys assigned to the Mental Health Division will work together with others in the criminal justice system to help as many people with mental illness as possible. They also will train and assist the nearly 1,000 deputy district attorneys in my office to resolve these cases in a just and humane manner.

In the past, some people have served more time behind bars due to their untreated mental illness and, as a result, they experienced further mental deterioration. When they are released from jail many are homeless and end up rearrested for offenses committed as a result of their illness. These cases reveal a system that I consider to be inefficient, ineffective and immoral.

Through the Mental Health Advisory Board, we as a county have taken significant and innovative steps to improve the way people with mental illness are treated in every step of the criminal justice system – starting with their first interaction with a peace officer. This new division will help guide us through this changing criminal justice landscape.

We are witnessing transformation. Change is evident in new state laws, policies, attitudes and funding decisions. Last year, Governor Brown signed legislation creating mental health diversion.

I have also established an office policy that empowers my deputy district attorneys to consider a defendant's mental health in settling cases. This policy also gives my attorneys the authority to transfer cases in which the defendant is mentally ill to alternative sentencing courts. With this policy, I am encouraging my lawyers to make courageous decisions and do the right thing. It can be scary for a prosecutor.

We take an oath to protect our community. No one wants to be the one whose decision leads to heartache for another family. There are no guarantees. But we must be willing to make informed decisions to ensure public safety and help another human being in crisis.

To truly embrace innovative justice, we must have programs in place throughout the criminal justice system to identify members of our community who need treatment and housing. My attorneys will work with law enforcement, defense attorneys, judges, mental health providers and others to secure the needed resources.

One of my first priorities as District Attorney was to develop a comprehensive plan that would enhance treatment and services to safely help people living with mental illness in the criminal justice system. In 2013, I formed what became the Mental Health Advisory Board with health and criminal justice professionals. Together, we created the Blueprint for Change. The report mapped out a path to resolve problems within the mental health and justice systems. This county embraced our recommendations.

First, we determined that we had to train law enforcement personnel on how to safely de-escalate encounters with people in a mental health crisis. In response, my office led the way and has provided free mental health awareness training to more than 1,400 first responders throughout Los Angeles County. Local law enforcement and the county's Department of Mental Health have increased the number of clinicians available to assist with incidents involving someone experiencing a mental health crisis.

In 2016, I named a deputy district attorney, Tracey Whitney, to serve as my Mental Health Liaison – a first of its kind in the nation. She has been my eyes and ears on these important issues. As you can see, my office has and will continue to serve as a catalyst for innovative justice.

For their part, the Board of Supervisors dedicated \$120 million to address the treatment and housing needs of people with mental illness. Thank you, supervisors. They also established the county Office of Diversion and Reentry, led by Judge Espinoza. ODR, as it's known, has been at the forefront in seeking additional resources to support efforts to treat people with mental illness and help keep them out of the criminal justice system. I look forward to working with ODR and the county Department of Mental Health to find innovative solutions that can affect not only court dockets and jail populations but also a person's life.

### **[About the Los Angeles County District Attorney's Office](#)**

Los Angeles County District Attorney Jackie Lacey leads the largest local prosecutorial office in the nation. Her staff of nearly 1,000 attorneys, 300 investigators and 800 support staff members is dedicated to protecting our community through the fair and ethical pursuit of justice and the safeguarding of crime victims' rights.