

We, as individuals who are current members of the Montgomery County Public Defender's Office, write in support of our former Chiefs, Dean Beer and Keisha Hudson. They earned our support by fiercely and zealously advocating for each and every client, establishing a holistic and trauma-informed approach to Public Defense, engaging in community outreach and organization, striving for policy reform, and serving as strong mentors and support systems to us, their employees. A vast majority of us were hired by Dean and Keisha and we came from other Public Defender Offices, other fields of social justice, from judicial clerkships, and other passions because we saw and respected the vision that Dean and Keisha fostered for an independent office that tirelessly advocated within the courthouse and within the community. The Mission Statement of the Office is:

“The Montgomery County Office of the Public Defender fights for every client, recognizing their individualized experiences. We champion change by being the voice that demands justice and fairness for all. We are administrative support clerks. We are investigators. We are social workers. We are paralegals. We are attorneys. Together, we are Public Defenders.”

Following the events of the last week, we are left feeling as if their vision, and ours, is not supported by Montgomery County. To witness our Chiefs fired, in serial fashion, escorted from the Office by security, given no opportunity to stop to explain their dismissal or to check on the staff they had recruited and advocated for daily was deeply upsetting, and created a sense of confusion, fear, and had a chilling effect on those of us who remained. We were left to question the independence of the Office, the impact of our advocacy, and whether such advocacy would be limited. We have been provided no explanation for the firings—all we have been told is that they have been replaced, and we then received a subsequent follow-up statement detailing the County's commitment to indigent defense, the Office, and the County's support of a pretrial services program and bail reform.

While we are grateful to hear that the County supports us, and a Pretrial program, it remains deeply concerning that the actions of the last few weeks may speak louder than any words. The Office of the Public Defender had submitted an amicus brief, in support of bail reform, to the Pennsylvania Supreme Court. We were asked to file this in support of state-wide bail reform, and to shine a light on the issues of pretrial detention and cash bail. The amicus brief provided specific examples of people who suffered as a result of cash bail in Montgomery County. Shortly after its filing, the amicus brief was withdrawn. Then our Chiefs were fired. Given the close proximity of those events, it is hard to not draw a direct line between the brief and the firings. It is also difficult to

understand how a brief, advocating for bail reform, would not advance the interests of a county pretrial services program. The seeming influence over our Office's ability to advocate for policy initiatives is deeply concerning. This is particularly true where Dean and Keisha consistently encouraged us to zealously advocate for each individual client, while also recognizing and striving for overall criminal justice reform.

As Public Defenders, our mission extends beyond the individual client and the individual case. Our mission necessarily includes exposing systemic issues, and tackling them with the same advocacy that we utilize in a courtroom. Dean and Keisha exemplified this with their work in the office, and the community. They have established and maintained relationships with numerous stakeholders in the community, providing partnership opportunities and increasing our involvement and interaction with community issues. Some of these local partnerships and programs include: Legal Aid of Southeastern Pennsylvania; Pottstown Trauma Informed Community Connection; Youth Law Enforcement Forums in Pottstown, Jenkintown, Norristown, and Cheltenham; Youth Courts in Norristown High School, Pottstown Middle School, and Cheltenham High School; numerous law schools for clinics and practicums including appellate clinics with Penn and Drexel, and an expungement clinic with Villanova, and The Juvenile Law Center, who provided assistance on juvenile lifer cases and data collection on juvenile fines and costs issues. Dean and Keisha were also responsible for establishing a satellite Public Defender Office in June 2016, which has served nearly 1000 clients to date and was an important step in easing access to the services of our office. Additionally, Dean and Keisha were instrumental in continuing a Participatory Defense Hub, one of the first in the country, which helps family members navigate the criminal justice system, and provides them the power to assist in their loved-one's case. Additionally, Dean and Keisha have created training partnerships with the Public Defender's Association of Pennsylvania (PDA), The Pennsylvania Association of Criminal Defense Lawyers (PACDL), the National Association for Criminal Defense Lawyers (NACDL), Pennsylvania Bar Institute (PBI), and Gideon's Promise. Not only can employees attend these trainings, but several staff members serve as faculty on these programs. Gideon's Promise, in particular, provides a multi-year training program for our young hires that allows them to not only learn best practices, but to have a community of support as they navigate the early years of Public Defense.

These partnerships and community outreach often necessitated long hours, both in the office and in the community for Dean and Keisha. The number of evenings that Dean remained in the office past 7, only to then run to community events is beyond count. However, he never complained because he believed that our work in the community was equally as important as our work in the courtroom. Additionally, both Dean and Keisha routinely demonstrated that they were willing to share our workload by providing coverage in the Pottstown Satellite Office and the Criminal Miscellaneous List, representing clients in preliminary hearings and probation revocations, and, recently,

Keisha served as second chair in a Homicide case. Dean and Keisha did not just talk the talk, they actively and consistently walked the walk. This level of commitment inspired us every day. To know that they had our backs, that they were in the fight too, that they recognized and understood the challenges of our work was invaluable.

Under their leadership, the Office now receives nationwide applicants for attorney positions and interns. Our Office's prominence has risen under their leadership, and it would be unfortunate if these recent events jeopardized our partnerships or our respect within the Public Defense or Montgomery County Communities. The citizens of Montgomery County deserve a Public Defender's Office that protects their rights above all other interests. We can say with commitment, heart, and passion, that Dean and Keisha ensured that the citizens received exactly that promise.

You may notice that we have referred to our Chiefs by their first names throughout—that is because they have always treated us as people, not just employees. They have assisted us with case strategy, expert funding, our personal community outreach, training, and development. They have lent us their strength by standing alongside us as we take verdicts or hear the results of challenging sentencing proceedings. To know that your bosses care about you personally matters. This work can be hard, and it takes a village, and we have been so grateful to have Dean and Keisha as the leaders of our village.

We ask that the County Commissioners consider the thoughts and experiences of those of us who most closely worked with Dean and Keisha, those of us who share their vision and wish to see it continue, those of us who understand the high quality representation and advocacy they espoused in the office and in the community, and the partnerships they forged to advance our clients' interests and the broader issue of criminal justice reform.

To be clear, our current leadership, Greg Nester and Carol Sweeney, have our full support. They have earned and deserve our respect, and their dedication to us and the office is unquestioned. However, we are deeply troubled by the events that led to Dean and Keisha's firing. As such, we feel that both the Commissioners and our county citizens deserve to know that Keisha and Dean were strong advocates, supportive bosses, and great community partners. As those of us who worked hand and hand with them daily, we cannot let our respect, appreciation, and support for them go unstated. We also take this opportunity to note that zealous representation requires independence from outside influence. We cannot effectively advocate if we are beholden to Courts or County Officials or fear reprisal for our advocacy.

We ask that the Commissioners reconsider this action, and reinstate Dean Beer and Keisha Hudson as leaders of our office.

We also make a promise to the citizens of Montgomery County that we remain fully committed to zealous advocacy in the courtroom and in the community.

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