



SANTA CRUZ COUNTY OFFICE OF THE  
**PUBLIC DEFENDER**  
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**\*\*\* FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE 5/5/26] \*\*\***

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## **Santa Cruz County Public Defender Applauds Unanimous Passage of ACR 159, Calls for Critical Investment in Public Defense**

### **FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE**

**Sacramento, CA** — Santa Cruz County Public Defender Heather Rogers joined chief public defenders from across California at the State Capitol this week as the Assembly formally presented and unanimously passed Assembly Concurrent Resolution 159 (ACR 159), authored by Ash Kalra. The resolution, championed by Assemblymembers Ash Kalra, Sade Elhawary, and Nick Schultz, underscores the urgent need for renewed investment in California’s indigent defense system.

ACR 159 affirms the essential role of public defenders in safeguarding constitutional rights while recognizing the ongoing challenges of excessive workloads and chronic underfunding across the state.

“Every day, we sit with people at some of the hardest moments of their lives, where what’s on the line is their freedom, their family, and their future,” said Heather Rogers, Chief Public Defender of Santa Cruz County. “ACR 159 recognizes the central role of public defense, but it also highlights a reality we

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confront daily: without sufficient resources, the right to counsel is at risk of becoming more promise than practice.”

Assemblymember Kalra, a former public defender, emphasized the importance of the resolution in highlighting both the role and the needs of indigent defense systems statewide.

ACR 159 does not appropriate funding. However, it comes alongside a coordinated call from the California Public Defenders Association and public defense leaders for a \$45 million investment over three years to strengthen public defense infrastructure, expand staffing, and support early-career attorneys entering the field.

“When public defense is under-resourced, the harm is not evenly distributed,” Rogers added. “People of color are disproportionately impacted, and people without financial means remain in custody pretrial because they cannot afford bail. At the same time, excessive caseloads force defenders into triage, creating delays that have real consequences for individuals, families, and communities.”

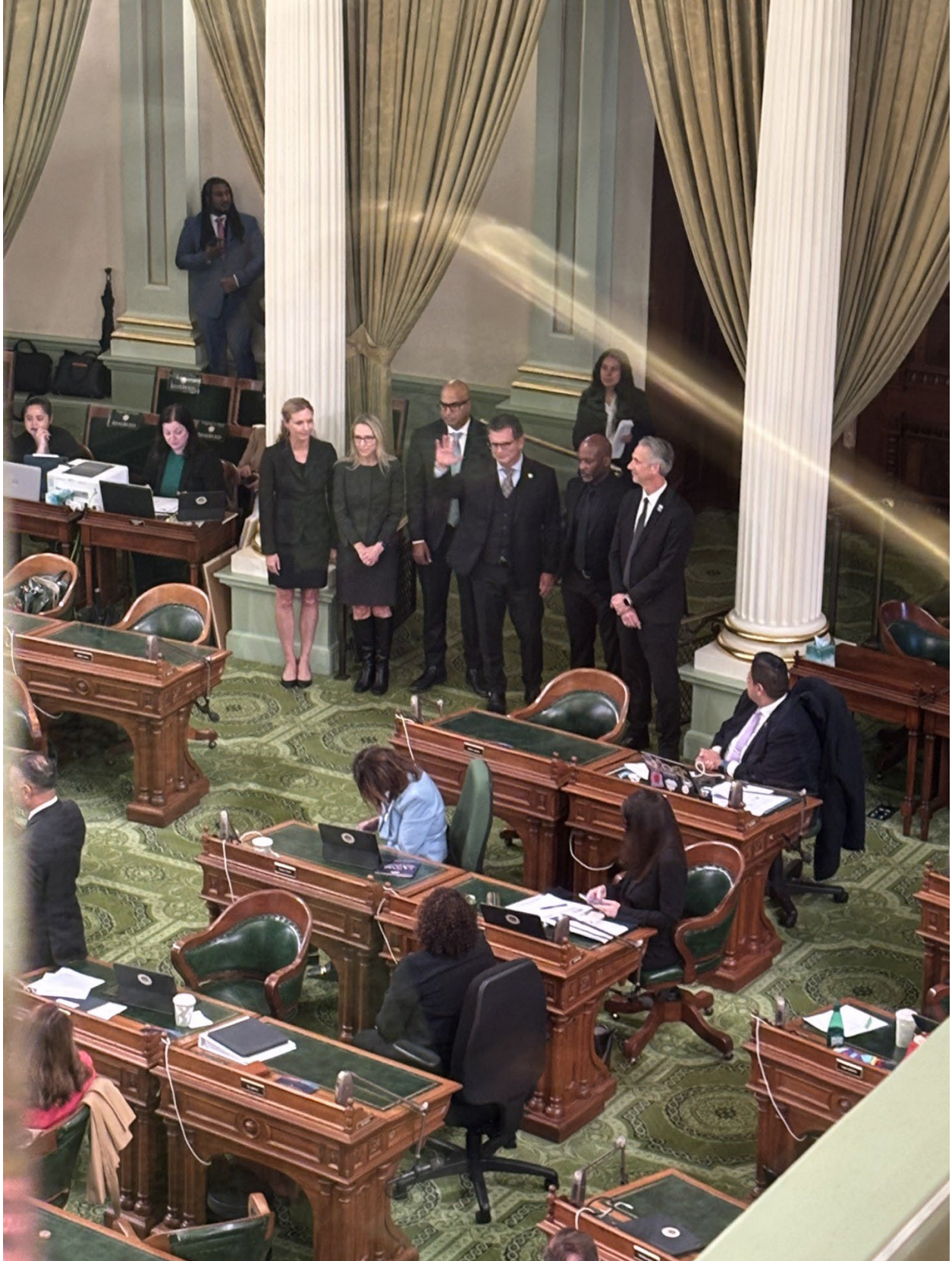
Public defenders, advocates, and community leaders gathered at the Capitol in support of both the resolution and the accompanying funding proposal, signaling growing statewide momentum toward a more equitable and effective legal system.



**Photo Caption:**

Chief public defenders from across California join Assemblymembers Ash Kalra, Sade Elhawary, and Nick Schultz in calling for statewide support and funding for public defense.

Photo courtesy of Assemblymember Ash Kalra's office.



**Photo Caption:**

Chief public defenders appeared on the Assembly floor and packed the galley in support of ACR 159. Pictured (left to right): Santa Cruz Chief Heather Rogers, Sacramento Chief Amanda Benson, San Francisco Chief Manohar Raju, Los Angeles Chief Ricardo Garcia, Alameda Chief Brendon Woods; Santa Clara Chief Damon Silver.

Photo courtesy of Stanislaus Chief Jennifer Jennison.