



A NEW CHAPTER FOR CIVIL RIGHTS

Joseph Doherty to open People's Justice Project today

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For the last two years, Joseph Doherty has been defending civil rights in Santa Barbara County as a public defender, providing representation for the community's disadvantaged. He's defended constitutional rights in thousands of cases, but now, on the first Martin Luther King Day of the 2020s, he's ready to take his work to the next level.

Opening today at 827 State St., The People's Justice Project is Mr. Doherty's new non-profit law firm created to protect the civil rights, liberties and dignity of all Santa Barbara residents.

By providing high-quality legal and social services, Mr. Doherty wants to represent the disadvantaged and vulnerable people in the Santa Barbara community, and be a friend to them where they may feel like they don't have any, he told the News-Press.

"I want them to feel at home at home. For most of the people that are unhoused in this community, they grew up here. It's not a transient

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situation when you're looking at the majority of people who are unhoused, and for them to not be treated like neighbors and residents is injustice on its face, unfair and shameful. That really needs to be rectified, and if I can be a part of that, that would make the project a success," said Mr. Doherty.

Mr. Doherty plans to fight for the community's civil rights by providing civil litigation assistance, assistance in screening for U.S. citizenship eligibility, applying for U.S. citizenship, and other immigration law services, and criminal defense litigation assistance, including post-conviction services, to who people who otherwise could not afford it.

While at law school and working as a public defender in Santa Barbara, Mr. Doherty has always had a natural desire to protect people who were voiceless and disadvantaged. Inspired from a young age by the civil rights movement of the 60s and 70s, Mr. Doherty looked to the leaders of that time and asked what approaches were the most successful.

"Much of the action and forward progress that was made was done in the courts, and so I looked at that as probably the most effective and efficient avenue for me to take if I wanted to continue the movement forward. That's why I went to law school, that's why we're here today," said Mr. Doherty.

Opening the People's Justice Project on Martin Luther King Day is Mr. Doherty's tribute to the most inspirational civil rights leader in the last 200 years, he told the News-Press.

"It was fitting to me to celebrate his birthday with the opening of a new chapter of civil rights struggle, and forwarding his mission and vision to bring equality to people who are not receiving it," said Mr. Doherty.

Mr. Doherty had always planned to open a law firm to defend civil rights by representing defendants in infraction cases, as they do not have a constitutional right to representation and often go without, but was motivated to create the People's Justice Project sooner than expected.

In October of last year, Mr. Doherty believed the unhoused community was going to be enforced against more heavily than in the past through a series of proposed City ordinances, including two that would empower police to crack down on shopping carts and belongings left in public spaces.

"Who is using those shopping carts? In some cases they are people who are using the shopping carts just to get groceries from retailers to their home, but in most cases they're being used as a walker and mobile storage unit for people who don't have a home for their property. If you're targeting those people, the unhoused, I think that that's unfair," said Mr. Doherty.

The ordinances were ultimately withdrawn in November while City staff and the Council review alternatives solutions, like providing public storage units at various city and county buildings.

While Mr. Doherty is supportive of the search for different ways to alleviate the homeless crisis through stakeholder meetings, he is committed to ending what he sees as the over-policing and unconstitutional seizure and destruction of property from unhoused people.

"If the city is going to be beefing up its efforts to prosecute those people, and if the public defend-

er is not mandated by the constitution to represent and protect those people, somebody must," said Mr. Doherty.

Enforcing laws like the shopping cart ordinance sets back progress made on housing issues by making it more difficult for the unhoused to go through the process of getting back into a home, said Mr. Doherty.

"There are so many places that people need to go to be in a situation where they can become housed. They can't go to these places because they fear if they leave their property outside and go into these buildings their property will be lost or taken or confiscated, they are reluctant to do that, so it really prohibits the progress that we want to see," said Mr. Doherty.

The ordinances represent an approach that Mr. Doherty has seen largely fail, he said.

"If you're criminalizing living in a car, and you can't afford a home, there's only one other option," said Mr. Doherty. "If you're then criminalizing setting up a tent, what's left? Death or Jail. That's just not acceptable."

Housing is Mr. Doherty's ultimate priority, but he, along with his colleague Attorney Renee Joy Lizarraga, will also provide immigration assistance. Mr. Doherty and Ms. Lizarraga, who works for the Santa Barbara Public Defender's office and is fluent in Spanish, will guide clients through citizenship applications and complex immigration laws.

"There is definitely a correlation between illegal immigration status and not being able to have a job or a home, so there's a crossover there between trying to ammelerate homelessness by assisting people with at least giving them the information to get going in the right direction for legal citizenship," said Mr. Doherty.

There are other legal resources for the homeless in Santa Barbara, like Legal Aid, but they are funded by the City and County. The People's Justice Project is a non-profit funded by a \$3,000 grant from the Fund for Santa Barbara, and generous donations from Peter Marin and the Committee for Social Justice, as well as from Glen Mowrer and several donors who prefer to remain anonymous. Mr. Doherty said he would be willing to represent clients against the City and County if presented with evidence that their civil rights were violated.

Mr. Doherty is currently reviewing cases for the People's Justice Project, but will continue to work as a Public Defender for San Luis Obispo County. It will be a lot of work to balance, but it's a part of his identity now and he's not ready to leave, Mr. Doherty told the News-Press.

"It's just so inspiring and fueling for me to meet people, a mass amount of people that need the help and can't afford to have other kinds of representation. They're backs are against the wall and I take great pride and get a lot of energy from being able to help them in that circumstance," said Mr. Doherty.

In addition to defending the unhoused community's 4th and 5th amendment rights, Mr. Doherty will be focusing on expunging clients' legal records of arrests that did not result in prosecution, a major issue in the homeless community.

Now that People's Justice Project is open for business, those interested in Mr. Doherty's services can email joedohertylaw@gmail.com, call 805-679-5595, or stop by his office to make an appointment.

email: cwhttle@newspress.com

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