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December 30, 2016

An Open Letter to District Attorney Leon Cannizzaro, Jr:

The Legal Aid Society, the nation's oldest and largest not-for-profit legal services organization, is an indispensable component of the legal, social and economic fabric of New York City – passionately advocating for low-income individuals and families across a variety of criminal, civil and juvenile rights matters, while also fighting for legal reform. The Society has performed this role in City, State and federal courts since 1876.

The Society's Criminal Practice and Juvenile Rights Practice are the primary public defender in the City of New York. During the last year, our Criminal Practice represented over 230,000 indigent New Yorkers accused of unlawful or criminal conduct on trial, appellate, and post-conviction matters. In the context of this practice the Society represents people accused of crimes from their initial arrest through the post-conviction process. Our Juvenile rights Practice, provides comprehensive representation as attorneys for children who appear before the New York City Family Court in abuse, neglect, juvenile delinquency, and other proceedings affecting children's rights and welfare. Last year, the Juvenile Rights staff represented some 34,000 children, including approximately 4,000 who were arrested by the NYPD and charged in Family Court with juvenile delinquency. In both practices, investigators are critical members of our defense team. They are true professionals, many of them former law enforcement officers, who have joined our organization to provide the highest quality of services to our clients. When they are out in the field on behalf of our clients, they comport themselves with the law and ethics required of them.

Circumstances in Orleans Parish require us to speak out against your decision to use the full force of the criminal justice system to target an investigator at the Orleans Public Defender for doing her job. It is an attack on public defense itself, designed to erode the quality of representation provided to the most vulnerable and oppressed people in New Orleans. We call on you to do the right thing – which is to dismiss this indictment and resolve this matter professionally in conversation with the head of OPD.

December 30, 2016

In 2014, Taryn Blume was an investigator with OPD. Every day, she worked with the lawyers and other professionals at OPD to insure her clients enjoyed the same rights guaranteed to everyone in this country by our Constitution -- the rights to liberty and justice for all; to due process of law and a fair trial; and to a lawyer who defends you when the government accuses you of a crime and seeks to take away your freedom. Her job as an investigator required her to seek out the relevant facts and evidence in her clients' cases, wherever those might be. Taryn did her job honestly, and professionally, as the law required her to do.

To be clear, the accusation against Ms. Blume appears frivolous to us. Taryn has repeatedly denied the allegation, and as Public Defenders, we are familiar with being mistaken or misunderstood by witnesses and community members as a "DA". We have all introduced ourselves to witnesses with our business cards and an announcement that we represent the defendant in a criminal case, only to hear later that the witness thought we were "with the prosecutor." That fact alone begs the question, "Why would Ms. Blume needlessly 'impersonate a peace officer' to get records that were available to her just by asking for them?" The answer is, she would not, and she did not.

Public defenders are accustomed to being unpopular. We represent people who are often scorned in their communities and publicly disparaged by the media and people in power. But a bedrock principle of our criminal justice system is that every citizen accused by the government of a crime starts with the benefit of the doubt – with a presumption that they are in fact innocent. That right becomes meaningless if we do not uphold the equally important right of every citizen-accused to a defense team who fights for her cause; who digs for evidence of her innocence; who exposes the government when it hides that evidence. The legitimacy of our criminal justice system depends upon defense lawyers and defense investigators doing their jobs, and doing them well, without fear of reprisal from a prosecutor acting more like a bully than the champion of truth and justice he is supposed to be.

Dismiss this Indictment against Ms. Blume.



Seymour James
Attorney-in-Chief



Tina Luongo
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