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NEWS RELEASE

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Cuauhtémoc Ortega Appointed as New Federal Public Defender for Central District of California

SAN FRANCISCO — Judges of the United States Court of Appeals for the Ninth Circuit have appointed Cuauhtémoc Ortega as the next federal public defender for the Central District of California. He began his four-year term today, October 15, 2020, following his oath of office. He succeeded Amy Karlin, who served as interim federal public defender after former FPD Hilary Potashner entered private practice in October 2019.

“Cuauhtémoc Ortega is an outstanding addition to the federal defender community,” said Circuit Judge Kim McLane Wardlaw, who chairs the Ninth Circuit’s Standing Committee on Federal Public Defenders. “With his extensive criminal defense experience and administrative acumen, we are confident he will carry on the office’s tradition of providing excellent public service. We are also very grateful to Amy Karlin for providing steady leadership while we conducted our search for a new FPD.”

Ortega said, “I am honored and humbled by the opportunity to lead an office of individuals so fervently committed to providing the highest quality representation to our clients. Together, we will challenge ourselves to build on our office’s strong foundation and achieve new levels of excellence.”

Ortega began working in the Office of the Federal Public Defender for the Central District of California in 2010 as a line deputy in the Orange County Division, where he represented clients charged with a broad range of federal offenses. In 2016, after a short stint in private practice, he returned to the FPD’s office as a supervisor in the Los Angeles Division’s Trial Unit. In 2019, he was promoted to chief deputy and divided his time between administrative responsibilities, supervision, collaboration with other agencies in the district, and client representation.

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The Office of the Federal Public Defender for the Central District of California is the largest office in the national federal defender system. The Central District encompasses seven counties—Los Angeles, Orange, Riverside, San Bernardino, San Luis Obispo, Santa Barbara and Ventura, and has a population of over 19 million people. The office currently has over 200 employees.

The Office of the Federal Public Defender was created by Congress to fulfill the constitutional requirement that financially eligible individuals charged with crimes in the federal justice system be provided with professional legal representation at no cost. By statute, judges of the courts of appeals select and appoint the federal public defender for a renewable four-year term. In the Ninth Circuit, FPD applicants are evaluated by both a local screening committee and the court's Standing Committee on Federal Public Defenders, applying Equal Employment Opportunity guidelines. Reappointment to additional terms is based upon demonstration of highly satisfactory performance as determined by a broad survey and performance evaluation.

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