COMMONWEALTH OF THE NORTHERN MARIANA ISLANDS

Office of the Governor

PUBLIC DEFENDERS OFFICE

FY 2026 CITIZEN CENTRIC REPORT

PROGRAM OVERVIEW

The PDO is created by 1 CMC § 2201. The duties are set forth in 1 CMC 2203.

The PD Office is charged with the duty to defend indigent defendants in criminal cases before the courts of the Commonwealth and to render legal assistance to people in need of legal counsel who are unable to afford it.

The PDO defends the rights guaranteed to our residents under the Commonwealth Constitution, and the U.S. Constitution and the Commonwealth statutes. In addition, such representation must be faithfully executed in accordance with an attorney code of ethics called the Model Rules of Professional Conduct. This code of ethics which every attorney employed here has sworn to uphold demands that we provide zealous and competent representation, have undivided loyalty to the clients, keep their confidences, and advocate for them to the best of our abilities.

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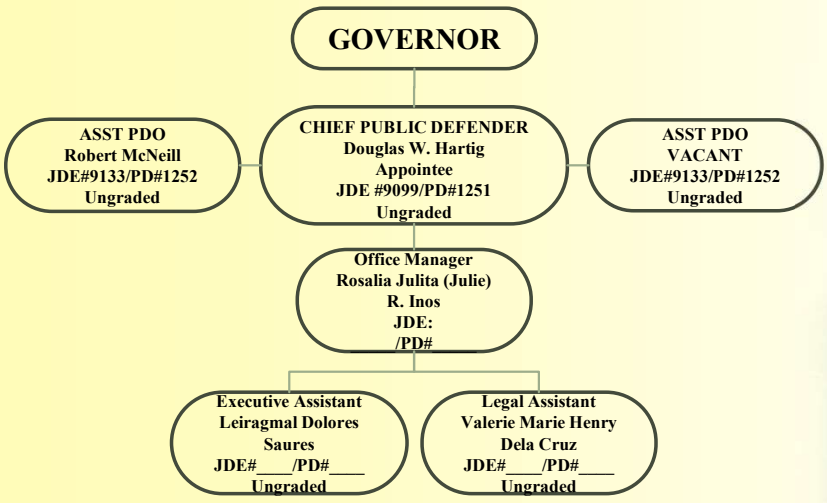
ORGANIZATIONAL CHART





WE ARE THE PUBLIC DEFENDERS OFFICE

The government is required by law to create and sufficiently fund the Office of the Public Defender (PDO). As it is a legal/constitutional requirement, the services of the PDO are essential services the CNMI government is obligated to provide, as much as it is obligated to provide for the public safety, health, and welfare of our citizens. Effective assistance of counsel, individual rights and equal justice are guaranteed by the CNMI Constitution and the U.S. Constitution.

OUR TEAM

Douglas W. Hartig
Chief Public Defender

Robert McNeill
Assistant Public Defender

Rosalia Julie Inos
Office Manager

Dolores Saures
Executive Assistant

Valerie Dela Cruz
Legal Assistant









MISSION STATEMENT

THE COMMONWEALTH CONSTITUTION AND THE UNITED STATES CONSTITUTION GUARANTEE CERTAIN FUNDAMENTAL RIGHTS TO ALL PEOPLE IN THE COMMONWEALTH. THESE INCLUDE THE RIGHT TO DUE PROCESS OF LAW, THE RIGHT TO EFFECTIVE ASSISTANCE OF COUNSEL, THE RIGHT TO A FAIR, PUBLIC AND SPEEDY TRIAL, AND THE EQUAL PROTECTION OF THE LAWS. THE OFFICE OF THE PUBLIC DEFENDER ENSURES THAT ALL INDIGENT PEOPLE RECEIVE THE PROTECTION OF THESE GUARANTEES AS REQUIRED BY LAW. THE PUBLIC DEFENDER IS APPOINTED BY THE GOVERNOR WITH THE ADVICE AND CONSENT OF THE SENATE. THE PUBLIC DEFENDER IS ASSISTED BY ASSISTANT PUBLIC DEFENDERS, INVESTIGATORS AND AN ADMINISTRATIVE STAFF. THEY STRIVE TO PROVIDE LEGAL SERVICES CONSISTENT WITH PROFESSIONAL STANDARDS AND ETHICAL RULES GOVERNING THE PRACTICES OF LAW.



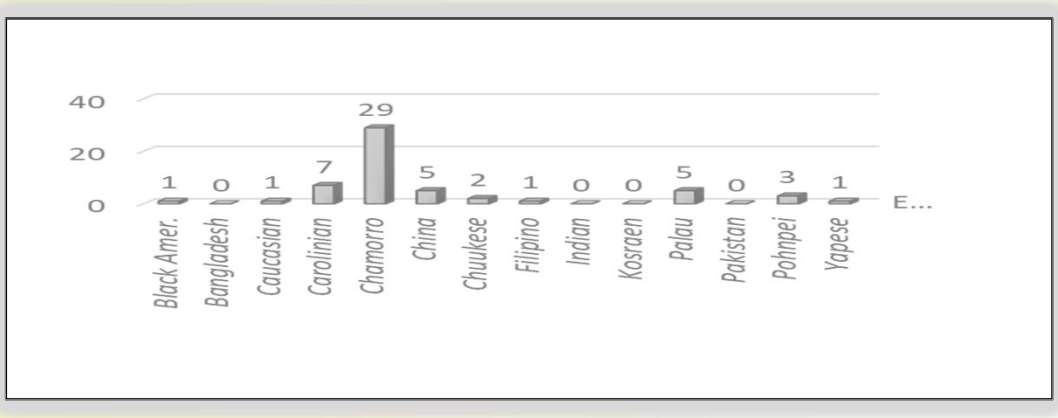
HOW ARE WE DOING?

The PDO is responsible for the defense of indigent persons in criminal cases before both the Superior and Supreme Courts of the Commonwealth. The PDO provides these services on Saipan, Tinian and Rota.

The PDO represents residents in several different categories of case. These are criminal (both felony and Misdemeanor), traffic, juvenile and appeals.

One (1) position is the Public Defender and four (4) positions are Assistant Public Defenders, we currently have only one (1) assistant Public defender. We are currently down to only one (1) legal assistant and one (1) office executive assistant who works collaboratively in whatever manner necessary to facilitate smooth and efficient services for attorneys and clients; and one (1) office manager who oversees the daily and monthly routine functions of the office while maintaining the fiscal and budgeting responsibilities.
PDO was instrumental in establishing Drug Court and continues to be an integral part of that program.
PDO is very proud to now also be integral in establishing Mental Health Court.

PDO CASE BREAKDOWN BY ETHNICITY



REVENUE & EXPENSES

FY 2026 BUDGET (PL 24-01)

NOP	Personnel	All Others	Utilities	Total
9	$538,515	$5,385	$0	$543,900

FY 2027 BUDGET (PL 24-40)

NOP	Personnel	All Others	Utilities	Total
6	$243,217	$2,432	$0	$245,649

ON-GOING CHALLENGES

- **The PDO should maintain the current and absolute minimum staffing level required to provide our essential service to the people of the CNMI. But due to austerity needs we will cut one lawyer position in the current fiscal year. This will increase the already stressful demands put on our lawyers. This is a greater burden on lawyers already fully engaged in their cases. Maintaining this case load while paid less than fellow public defenders on the mainland and less than our counterparts at the Attorney General's Office is difficult and demoralizing. We need to be able to overhaul employment contracts and recruiting methods something that has not been done in over 30 years and increase salaries.**

- **The PDO must continue with Westlaw legal research and Pro-law database management, essential subscriptions that cannot be removed. This office is fully reliant on technology. If these products were removed, the office would not be able to access any case files, history, calendaring, conflict information, etc. which are all essential to meeting constitutional, legal, and judicial obligations. Gone are the days when lawyers could rely on a courthouse library. Filing is now electronic and a fee must be paid. A law office must be able to file and access court documents.**

- **The PDO will be most successful if allowed to continue implementing technology improvements through maintaining and upgrading internal computer networking and business processes. It should be noted that the overall implementation will require maintenance and a budget of more than the current $4,200. Westlaw alone a year is about $15,000.00**

- **The PDO desires to improve the ability to efficiently and ethically provide quality legal services to the people of the CNMI through proper training. Our attempt to improve office efficiency with technology also carries with it the transition of legacy staff to newer business processes and technologies. Also, attorneys are required to participate in continuing education as a requisite to their professional licensing, which we have not provided for in well over 20 years. Moreover, it helps them to better serve their clients.**

CONTACT US!

We are located in Susupe, Civic Center Complex between the Multi-purpose Center and the Joeten Kiyu Public Library
- **We are open Monday-Friday 7:30am-4:30pm**
- **Contact number is 670-234-6215 Please call to schedule for your appointment!**

