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Influx of state prosecutors continues cycle of mass incarceration and will harm Black and Brown communities

OAKLAND – Using state lawyers to prosecute local cases will fuel mass incarceration and the further devastation of Black and Brown communities, said Alameda County Chief Public Defender Brendon Woods.

“They’re trying to use a band-aid to fix a broken arm,” Woods said. “More prosecution and more police is not the solution here. We need housing, money for community-based organizations, higher wages, employment, as well as money for our schools, medical care and mental health.”

Woods is responding to the announcement by California Gov. Newsom and state Attorney General Bonta that they are sending lawyers from Bonta’s office and the National Guard to assist prosecuting cases in Alameda County and Oakland.

“People turn to crime because they have a sense of hopelessness,” Woods said. “Locking them up, taking away their prospects for employment and making their families’ lives difficult actually makes our communities less safe in the long run.”

The Public Defender’s Office is not aware of a shortage of local prosecutors that preceded Newsom and Bonta’s announcement. In addition, no new state funding was allocated to the Alameda County Public Defender’s Office, despite the fact that increased prosecution will lead to more cases being filed and increased caseloads. The Public Defender’s Office budget is approximately \$54.1 million per year; the District Attorney’s Office gets \$96 million per year.

In fact, several weeks ago, Gov. Newsom announced he was cutting the third year of grant money that funds the Public Defender’s post-conviction unit. That unit was created to implement a raft of new laws designed to reduce mass incarceration in California.

In the past, California experimented with increased prosecution and harsher sentences. That led to mass incarceration and severe prison overcrowding. It prompted numerous lawsuits, and eventually laws designed to reduce incarceration.

In addition, the criminal system disproportionately targets Black and Brown communities, as well as poor and mentally ill people. Those groups feel the brunt of increased law enforcement along with the destabilization that follows getting arrested.

Calls for crime crackdowns also embolden law enforcement abuses, such as the “Riders” and other scandals at the Oakland Police Department.

“We can’t keep doing this over and over,” Woods said. “We need different solutions.”