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**FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE**  
MONDAY, OCTOBER 26, 2020

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**QUEENS DISTRICT ATTORNEY MELINDA KATZ AND QUEENS DEFENDERS  
TEAM UP TO OFFER LOCAL COMMUNITY UNIQUE DIVERSION PROGRAM  
BASED AT THE ROCKAWAY COMMUNITY JUSTICE CENTER**

Queens District Attorney Melinda Katz announced today that her office has entered into a formal agreement with Queens Defenders for the launch of a new diversion program based at the Rockaway Community Justice Center, at 19-22 Mott Avenue in Far Rockaway. Under the program, eligible defendants accused of low-level crimes are referred to this locally-based diversion program and receive specialized intervention within their own community.

District Attorney Katz said, “We are happy to be working with Queens Defenders on this important initiative in the Far Rockaway community. This diversion program can make a big difference for people charged with low-level offenses. Successfully completing the program provides great opportunity for individuals to turn things around and be given a clean slate.”

Queens Defenders Executive Director Lori Zeno said, “We are thrilled to be partnering with District Attorney Melinda Katz and her office to bring this innovative court-alternative to the Far Rockaway community. The Rockaway Community Justice Center will offer residents a chance to end the cycle of criminal justice involvement at a crucial early stage develop skills and social capital and begin a new path toward a fulfilling and productive life. We’re proud to be a leading part of such a game-changing solution to local crime in an area of Queens that is too often overlooked and regularly abandoned by community partners.”

The District Attorney noted the efforts of City Councilmember Donovan Richards, Chair of the Public Safety Committee, who was an early supporter of the Rockaway Community Justice Center.

Councilman Richards said, “A low-level offense should not equal a life sentence for our young people. Unfortunately, that’s what happened too often in communities of color in the Rockaways, with young people locked out of employment, housing, job opportunities. This Community Justice Center provides a second chance at life with guidance and mentorship. Congratulations to DA Katz and Queens Defenders on their collaboration. I can’t wait to continue working together to ensure this program is a huge success.”

Individuals ages 18 to 24 accused of a variety of misdemeanor charges – criminal trespass, criminal mischief, making graffiti, petit larceny, criminal possession of stolen property and a few other crimes – are

eligible to participate in the program, which provides the opportunity to have their cases considered before peer- and community-led panels.

This localized, court-structured program is run by community leaders, including the heads of area churches and houses of worship, neighborhood organizations and business leaders. The goal is to use restorative justice strategies to address the needs of the accused, the victims and the community.

DA Katz pointed out that program participants can avoid leaving their community to come to the Courthouse in Kew Gardens, which can be a hardship for those with young children, caring for elderly family members, having employment commitments or simply lacking transportation. This is also a unique chance to get a fresh start by working within their community and gaining valuable skills along the way.

Participants are held accountable and work collaboratively with stakeholders and local police to build relationships and reestablish trust, using remedies designed to develop the offender's career skills. One of the goals is to help young, low-level offenders become more employable for the future, which ultimately empowers them to give back to their community.

Queens Defenders provides the training and guidance to the community and conducts on-going professional development to ensure compliance with known best practices and the evolving criminal justice reforms in New York. The Justice Center also offers a variety of other services, including housing mediation, job training and career readiness workshops.

Other partners for this initiative include the Rockaway Development & Revitalization Corporation (RDRC), Queens Public Library and the Queens Family Justice Center. Far Rockaway residents will also have access to legal, housing, and immigration services, domestic violence support services through the City's Domestic Violence & Empowerment (DoVE) initiative, emergency food assistance, a professional clothing bank, access to social workers who will offer referrals and support, and other services.

Upon successful completion of the community-based intervention program, the DA's Office will either decline to prosecute or dismiss the pending case. The defendant's case then becomes sealed and therefore not part of his or her record.

More information on the Rockaway Community Justice Center can be found at [rockawaycjc.org](http://rockawaycjc.org) or by calling 1-833-COMMCRT (266-6278).

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