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QUEENS DISTRICT ATTORNEY MELINDA KATZ
INTRODUces THE OFFICE'S CONVICTION INTEGRITY UNIT

Queens District Attorney Melinda Katz announced today that the new Conviction Integrity Unit she established on January 1, 2020, has been actively working to make sure that no one has been wrongfully convicted of a crime in Queens County. This Unit is the District Attorney's signature initiative and one of the first promises she made to the people of Queens when she endeavored to become the County's top law enforcement officer. To date, the Conviction Integrity Unit has received 46 cases for review with several active investigations currently underway. This is the first of a series of releases announcing the DA's newest bureaus and units within the Office.

"No one is perfect. No system is without flaws. And we know, without a doubt, that mistakes can happen, resulting in a miscarriage of justice," said District Attorney Katz. "It is vitally important to have a Unit that is dedicated to reviewing credible cases and empowered to make recommendations on anyone who should be exonerated if found to be wrongfully convicted."

Continuing, said the District Attorney, "Without a doubt, a wrongful conviction destroys a life. But, it also devastates that wrongfully convicted person's family. It is worth noting that when an innocent individual is locked away for a crime he or she did not commit, it means the guilty party has evaded justice and is free to commit other crimes."

The District Attorney sought out a proven leader for this Conviction Integrity Unit – someone who has a long track record identifying and proving cases of actual innocence. Unit Director Bryce Benjet most recently worked at the Innocence Project where he was a clinical professor at Cardozo Law School and handled a national docket of 25 to 30 cases focusing on DNA testing and other forensic science evidence.

The Unit is also expanding the staff with qualified and talented team members. We have added Senior Assistant District Attorney Alexis Celestin, an experienced prosecutor formerly with the Westchester DA's Office. Additional seasoned attorneys and investigators will join the Unit in the coming months. We are also in discussions to establish a law school clinic through which law students will assist in screening and investigating cases.

In just 4 months, 46 cases have been submitted to the Conviction Integrity Unit. At this point, the Unit has opened 10 active re-investigations of these cases which include a ground-up re-evaluation of the case, interviewing new witnesses, and the use of DNA and other forensic testing where available.

Out of the 46 cases submitted, 6 have been closed. Some were withdrawn from further consideration or have been referred to the appropriate jurisdictions or other bureaus within the Queens District Attorney's Office.

The CIU's mandate is to reinvestigate and resolve credible claims of actual innocence or wrongful convictions. In addition to the hard work of traditional fact investigation, the Unit will utilize cutting-edge DNA technology and other state-of-the-art forensic techniques to ensure the confidence of previous convictions. The Unit's work will be informed by research on proven exonerations nationwide involving eyewitness misidentification, unreliable scientific evidence and false confessions.

District Attorney Katz added that, our entire criminal justice system is built on the belief that one is innocent until proven guilty. But if someone is wrongfully convicted that undermines the faith we all have in our criminal justice system.

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Note to Editors: Press release e-version posted at www.queensda.org.