

Department of **PUBLIC DEFENSE**

DPD's Post-Conviction Unit: Helping Residents Reclaim Their Lives

DPD launched its post-conviction unit – a pilot project staffed by the equivalent of one FTE attorney and one FTE paralegal – in March 2019. The unit is helping clients get unpaid legal financial obligations waived, convictions vacated, driver's licenses reinstated, and firearm rights reinstated.

The department has had 282 inquiries since the unit's inception, most via the Director's Office and driven largely by a robust outreach effort, including coverage by the Seattle Times and other news outlets, community events, posters, fliers, and social media. As the chart below indicates, the unit has been able to help 204 clients, has gotten nearly \$80,000 in court fees waived, and has gotten 62 convictions vacated. Several cases are in progress. More referrals come in weekly, if not daily.

DPD, in creating this new unit, combined the county's funding with funding from City of Seattle, which had already seen the need to embed civil collateral consequence work within DPD. Embedding this post-conviction work in the department, particularly in conjunction with the already operating collateral consequences unit, allowed the post-conviction effort to benefit from many of DPD's resources and expertise. Here are some of the ways the post-conviction unit benefits from being embedded in DPD:

- The attorneys who comprise that one FTE in the unit (three attorneys working part-time) are highly skilled and well-supervised.
- The attorneys benefit from DPD's strong in-house training program.
- The attorneys, because of their collateral consequence work and engagement with DPD's criminal defense attorneys, are profoundly aware of the ways the criminal/civil legal system mars the lives of the people it ensnares.
- The unit is supported by the department's communications expertise, operations/administrative expertise, analytical work, and other services that come from being housed in a county department.

There's a strong human dimension to this work. Many of the convictions that people are seeking to get vacated are very old and from long-closed chapters in their lives – old drug convictions, prostitution convictions, assault convictions. Some have gotten thousands of dollars in LFOs waived. People have seen their credit scores go up as a result; they've gotten housing and jobs; they've come back in to thank us; they've cried when they heard the news.

Here's a look at what this unit has accomplished – by the numbers – since its inception in March 2019.

Number of clients referred to the unit for either post-conviction or LFO help	204
Number of convictions vacated	62
Number of LFOs cases resolved	50
Amount of money (principle and interest) waived	\$77,900
Number of clients who had firearm rights restored	6

One Man's Story: Detric Johnson

Detric Johnson was saddled with more than \$10,000 in LFOs – a debt that seemed hopeless to him – when an old DUI and another driving charge caught up with him. Sarah Wenzel, his public defender at DPD, was able to get the charges reduced without him having to serve time in jail; she then referred him to Lou Manuta, who works in the post-conviction unit, to address his crippling LFOs.



Lou met with Detric and his 3-year-old daughter Adryanna and starting poring over his history – LFOs that were more than 20 years old and from various jurisdictions. Lou contacted the

Texas Department of Licensing to address one of Detric's old tickets; he filed paperwork in King County to begin the process of getting those court fees waived; he created all the necessary documents so that Detric could file a motion and represent himself in Pierce County, where DPD doesn't work.

Legally, it was not challenging, Lou said. Many of these LFOs were so old that the court "is directed to grant relief" once a motion is filed, he said. "But Detric didn't know. Nobody tells our clients this."

Detric said he was nervous when he went into Pierce County Superior Court earlier this year, the paperwork Lou had drafted in hand. But as Lou predicted, the judge quickly and readily granted him relief. Because of Lou's work, Detric also got his driver's license reinstated and his King County LFOs waived.

Detric is now debt-free. His credit score has shot up 200 points. He has a job as a meat-cutter at Safeway in Rainier Valley. And he and his daughter, who had lived in a car for two years, are now in an apartment in North Seattle. His life is still challenging. He takes four separate buses each morning and evening to get his daughter to and from day care and himself to and from his job.

But he said he marvels at the way his life has turned around. "I'm like a normal American now," he said, smiling while holding his daughter at a coffee shop on Rainier Avenue. And he's deeply grateful to Lou for his help. "He saved my life. He saved my ability to believe in myself."