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## Federal Defender chief to join Stris & Maher as partner

**Cuauhtémoc Ortega, longtime head of the Central District federal defender office, will join Stris & Maher as a partner, bringing extensive experience in high-stakes criminal litigation.**

By Devon Belcher  
Daily Journal Staff Writer

Longtime Federal Public Defender Cuauhtémoc Ortega is stepping down from his leadership role in the Central District of California to join Stris & Maher LLP in Los Angeles as a partner on June 1, the firm announced Thursday.

According to the firm, Ortega will lead the criminal defense and investigations practice while also representing clients facing high-stakes civil disputes.

Since 2020, Ortega has led the largest federal defender office in the nation, overseeing about 220 employees and handling high-profile criminal matters, including public corruption, national security and white-collar cases. Last year, his office secured an acquittal in the first immigration raid protest case to reach a jury in the Central District, undercutting the government's case through cross-examination of a Border Patrol chief.

He joined the office in 2010 as a deputy federal public defender in the Orange County division and made U.S. history 10 years later as the first Mexican American to lead a federal defender office in the country.

"After 16 years in public service, I felt ready to bring my experience to new challenges in private practice at a firm where I could continue practicing high-stakes litigation and advocacy," Ortega said in an interview.



**ORTEGA**

The firm's news release said Ortega is joining at a time when clients increasingly seek trial-ready counsel capable of handling sensitive, high-exposure disputes across civil, criminal and regulatory matters.

"Stris & Maher has built something rare - a firm with an elite litigation practice, composed of lawyers with a stunning array of both private sector and government expertise in trials, ap-

peals, and Supreme Court litigation - and the experience and judgment to handle and win matters that are both high stakes and highly sensitive," Ortega said in a statement.

"The powerhouse talent the firm can offer its clients is exactly what drew me here. After years litigating against the federal government in the courtroom, I'm excited to join the team and bring that same intensity and focus to an entirely new set of clients and challenges."

During his tenure, Ortega said he was most proud of guiding the defender office through extended court closures during the COVID-19 pandemic while continuing to press for jury trials, expanding interdisciplinary defense teams with social workers and litigation specialists, and securing a string of high-profile acquittals in immigration cases despite significant resource challenges.

"I'm also proud that we succeeded in securing space in the historic Los Angeles Times building as our new headquarters," Ortega added.

The move, expected in 2027, will come as the office emerges from a yearslong hiring freeze and has begun expanding staff, consolidating operations into a single downtown location designed to accommodate its growing workforce. The new headquarters will occupy three floors in the South Tower of the Times Building at 202 W. First St., replacing its current split offices in Little Tokyo.

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