

THE **RECORDER**

Calif. Federal Public Defender to Join LA Boutique Firm Stris & Maher

By **Kat Black**

April 29, 2026

Federal Public Defender for the Central District of California Cuauhtémoc Ortega is stepping down from the largest federal defender office in the country to join boutique law firm Stris & Maher in Los Angeles as a partner, effective June 1.

Ortega, whose career at the federal defender's office has spanned 16 years, was appointed Federal Public Defender of the Central District of California in 2020 and oversaw approximately 220 employees during his tenure. The Central District of California—which includes Los Angeles, Orange, Ventura, Riverside, San Bernardino, Santa Barbara and San Luis Obispo counties—serves a population of over 19 million people.

Ortega said he was motivated to make a transition in his career after reflecting on his accomplishments, to date, as a federal defender.

“One of the things I’m proudest of was guiding the [federal defender’s] office through [the COVID-19 pandemic],” he recalled in an interview. “I took over the office in July of 2020 when COVID was raging, and it was unclear when we would be able to do jury trials again. And so, getting the office through that process took a lot of hard work, a lot of coordination with the courts



Courtesy photo

Los Angeles Federal Public Defender Cuauhtémoc Ortega.

and other agencies. And I was really proud of our team for getting the office through that.”

After reorganizing the office, expanding the number of attorneys and professional staff and finding a new headquarters location at the Los Angeles Times building, he said, he felt that the office was “in great shape” and that it was time to “try something new” and “have a new challenge.”

Ortega said he was drawn to Stris & Maher’s “incredible diversity of practices” and the professional backgrounds of its more than 30-attorney team. He is excited, in particular, about building a criminal defense practice at the firm.

“I think what I hope to do is increase its presence in the white-collar defense and investigation

areas in Southern California, where ... I'm a known quantity in this space," he said. "So all of that gelled together to make this seem like the perfect fit for me."

Peter Stris, founding partner at Stris & Maher, said in an interview that hiring Ortega is a "very significant moment," particularly at a time of rapid expansion for the firm.

"I think, like other litigation boutiques, we're seeing incredible activity in all of our practice areas," said Stris. The firm, founded in 2007, recently opened a new office in Washington, D.C., and is planning to launch a new flagship headquarters in Beverly Hills in 2027, which will allow it to add "30 new lawyers in the next 18 months," Stris said.

"I think it's pretty unusual that a firm with under three dozen lawyers has such a collection of senior government attorneys," said Stris. "We have five former federal prosecutors, including a U.S. attorney under President Biden. We have two state solicitor generals ... and ... we have two partners who were senior government lawyers. ... We just are focusing on a handful of areas where we can add, opportunistically, superstar practice leaders."

Ortega, a Southern California native who grew up in La Puente, graduated from Columbia Law School in 2007 and subsequently clerked for federal Judge Alicemarie Stotler in Orange County before a brief stint at Munger, Tolles & Olson in its downtown Los Angeles office.

In 2010, he joined the federal public defender's office at the Orange County branch, where he remained for six years, and was recruited to the Los Angeles office as a trial supervisor in 2016.

Prior to his appointment in 2020, he served as chief of the Los Angeles trial unit.

One of his proudest moments as federal public defender, he said, came during the escalation of immigration crackdowns in the Los Angeles area by Immigration Customs and Enforcement agents in the summer of 2025, when he tried the first case involving the arrest of an immigration raid protester to head to a jury trial in the Central District of California.

He ultimately secured an acquittal for the protester, who had been accused of assaulting a federal agent, after cross-examining Border Patrol chief Gregory Bovino, which he called a "surreal" experience.

"That was a really difficult time for the city," he said. "And so, our office came under the spotlight because so many of the people from the community were protesting, had encounters with law enforcement or were arrested, and they turned to us for advice. ... And I thought that it would be good for me to jump in and do a trial myself to show the office that ... we weren't afraid to be in the spotlight, and we weren't afraid to stand up for our community members. ... It was a really amazing opportunity because it felt like we were doing something that was ... not just necessary, but timely."

In addition to helping shore up Stris & Maher's white-collar defense and investigation practices, Ortega is also planning to be "actively involved" with civil cases going to trial.

"You have to be prepared to practice at the highest level in federal court, whether you're a public defender or a private attorney," he said. "And so, I want to bring that same level of preparation and process to the private sector."