

PARTNER

CUAUHTÉMOC ORTEGA

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Cuauhtémoc Ortega is a nationally recognized first-chair trial lawyer, accomplished litigator, and widely-respected leader in the legal profession. Before joining Stris & Maher LLP, he served for six years as the Federal Public Defender for the Central District of California—the largest federal defender office in the country—where he earned a reputation as one of the most trusted and formidable courtroom advocates in Southern California.

In 2020, Cuauhtémoc made history as the first Mexican American ever appointed to lead a federal defender office anywhere in the nation. Just 38 when appointed, he was also one of the youngest lawyers ever selected for the role. In 2024, the Ninth Circuit [reappointed him](#) to a second term, praising his “remarkable leadership” and noting that the Circuit’s judges “fully support” him as the office’s chief executive.

As Federal Public Defender, Cuauhtémoc managed an office of approximately 220 employees, including roughly 100 trial, appellate, and post-conviction lawyers. He oversaw office-wide litigation strategy, advised trial teams confronting difficult ethical and strategic issues, managed emergency responses in high-profile matters, and guided the office through evolving Department of Justice priorities and changes in federal sentencing law.



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While in the Federal Public Defender's Office, Cuauhtémoc handled hundreds of criminal matters at both the trial and appellate levels. His experience spans nearly every area of criminal law, including allegations of wire fraud, securities fraud, bank fraud, tax offenses, bribery, money laundering, racketeering, obstruction of justice, labor union fraud, trademark infringement, and false statements to federal authorities. He has represented public officials, business executives, entrepreneurs, attorneys, and individuals facing some of the most serious and high-profile prosecutions in the country, including sensitive national security matters and homicide cases carrying life-or-death consequences.

Cuauhtémoc brings rare credibility and experience to high-stakes litigation. Over the course of his 16 years in the Federal Public Defender's Office, he worked closely with circuit, district, and magistrate judges throughout the Ninth Circuit on issues relating to the administration of justice and developed unparalleled relationships and credibility within the federal courts. Because of his reputation as both a trial lawyer and institutional leader, he enters federal courtrooms throughout Southern California with well-earned trust and authority. His work and reputation has earned him numerous accolades, including recognition by the Daily Journal as one of the [Top 100 Attorneys in California](#).

A recognized thought leader on trial advocacy and courtroom strategy, Cuauhtémoc is frequently invited to lecture before lawyers, judges, and professional organizations throughout the United States and Mexico. He has also taught trial advocacy at University of California, Irvine School of Law and presented at the American Bar Association's White Collar Crime Institute and for the California Lawyers Association. Fluent in Spanish, he regularly lectures and presents in Spanish legal terminology.

Cuauhtémoc has also served on numerous judiciary committees and working groups focused on improving the functioning of the court system and the administration of justice, including the Ninth Circuit's Standing Committee on



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Federal Defenders, the Judicial Conference of the United States' Strategic Planning Group, and the Administrative Office of the U.S. Court's Risk and Financial Management Council. He also served on California's Commission on Judicial Nominees Evaluation, which evaluates candidates for judicial appointment across the state.

Cuauhtémoc graduated from Columbia Law School, where he served as Executive Articles Editor of the Columbia Law Review. He then clerked for the Honorable Alicemarie H. Stotler of the Central District of California before beginning his career in private practice.

Awards

Top 100 Lawyer, Daily Journal (2021)



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