

Nomination for the 2021 Challenge Award

Deadline: Midnight on Friday, September 10, 2021

Required: Attach a brief two-page Executive Summary to the online application on the innovative program

Description of Executive Summary

“These unique awards recognize the innovative and creative spirit of our California Counties as they find new, effective and cost-saving ways to provide programs and services to their citizens. This is a wonderful opportunity to spotlight your county’s best practices while recognizing staff for developing innovations in county government!”

Yolo County District Attorney’s Office Commons Transparency Portal

The Yolo County District Attorney’s Office is nominated for the 2021 Challenge Award for the tremendous work of co-creating, with New York non-profit Measures for Justice, the Commons Data Transparency Portal. This first of its kind portal is both innovative and creative and gives the community full access to criminal justice data in Yolo County. Commons was created for the community seeking transparency and trust.

On April 6, 2021, the Yolo County District Attorney’s Office partnered with Measures for Justice to launch the first ever Commons Data Transparency Portal. Commons is a co-created space for the community to explore criminal justice data, engage policy makers, and promote reforms. This portal allows the public to have ongoing access to Yolo County’s criminal justice data with the goal to increase accountability in the criminal justice system. Yolo County District Attorney Jeff Reisig and staff along with the Yolo County Multi-Cultural Community Council placed a high importance on providing criminal justice data transparency which is freely accessible to the public. The goal was to see the real data and, if disparities arose, address and correct them with policy.

Throughout the process Yolo County worked with community advocates and Yolo County officials receiving input on the most important elements needed to make this portal truly transparent. The DA’s Office believes that when the public, police, prosecutors, and courts share and trust the same data, those data become common ground for reform. Since Commons enables the community to see data for themselves, then the public can address any possible disparities. Inside the portal there are options to download the raw data, share it via email or social media, and most importantly send the data to local officials and/or media members. Besides those in the community, the District Attorney was fortunate to partner with Measures for Justice, a non-profit organization, on a mission to make accurate criminal justice data available to spur reform, to develop Commons, which is a first-of-its-kind online data dashboard that tracks local criminal justice data on a monthly basis alongside a policy goal embraced by the DA and community leaders.

This project was able to come to fruition quickly based on the fact that the DA’s Office was already one of the first in the state to go paperless. Yolo County DA already had a digital case management system on hand with digital stats ready for Measures for Justice to review. This facilitated the ability of Measures for Justice to pull data from the DA’s Office in order to verify and publish it on the Commons portal. Commons

is unique in that the county data is validated and posted by Measures for Justice, a neutral third party. The data is not controlled internally by the District Attorney's Office, unlike other portals across the nation. The dashboard is also the first to seek community input in terms of what data they want to see.

Measures for Justice, the DA's Partner in creating this unique portal has a slogan, "No Data. No Change." Their mission is to take accurate criminal justice data available to spur reform. With the assistance of Measures for Justice this Commons Data portal shows accurate performance measure data, standardizes and improves how criminal justice data are collected, recorded, and released for all. The launch of Commons almost immediately spurred reform and drove change in Yolo County. As a result of the published data on the Commons portal, the Yolo County District Attorney's Office has changed policy to ensure more cases – particularly those involving defendants of color – are diverted out of the criminal justice system.

The policy change means the office will no longer automatically disqualify an individual from being referred to a diversion program based on their criminal history and is estimated to increase diversions by 15 to 20 percent. Diversion allows an offender to participate in a program that helps remedy the behavior leading to the original arrest and also holds the offender accountable. Upon completion of the diversion program, the offender avoids a conviction or criminal record. The policy change is the first of many to come that will be driven by data from Commons.

The Commons data portal showed the office clear trends that could contribute to racial disparities in the criminal justice system. The Office saw in the data that people of color are disparately represented in cases referred to the office from local law enforcement agencies. Because criminal history is one of a number of factors determining diversion eligibility, people of color could be disproportionately denied the opportunity for their cases to be diverted before trial. This policy change addresses this disparity issue.

One of the other policy changes brought about by the Commons data portal is the "Race Blind Charging" system, which the DA's Office is implementing with the assistance of Stanford University. In order to remove bias, while reviewing cases referred to the DA's office from local law enforcement agencies, the DA's case management system removes race and incident location information as well as the booking photo. Therefore, the charging attorney will review the case strictly based on the facts provided without any unintended bias.

The following are quotes from Yolo County District Attorney Jeff Reisig and Yolo County Multi-Cultural Community Council Chair, Tessa Smith, during the launch of the Commons Portal. DA Reisig stated, "The Commons data portal allows people from every part of our county to have instant access to accurate information about our local criminal justice system. Let's use this transparency and open data to facilitate new conversations and drive the best possible outcomes for the people of our community." Yolo County MCCC Chair Tessa Smith said, "Any conversation about criminal justice between the powers that be and the community at large, is destined to be politically and emotionally charged. And yet, this discussion is one of the most important of our time. This offering acknowledges real policy and system change MUST be grounded in facts, that data fuels a truthful narrative and lays bare the impact and carriage of justice in this moment - for better and for worse."