

# LPoV Candidate Questionnaire Nov 2022

## General Questions

Candidate Name \*

Mano Raju

Candidate Website

votemano.com

Why are you running for *this* office?

I've given my heart and soul to defending San Franciscan's constitutional rights and have initiated many programs furthering criminal legal system reform in the city. I am seeking to be reelected as Public Defender to continue my commitment to fighting tooth & nail to protect my clients from cruel & ineffective tough-on-crime policies that have failed to improve public safety. I seek to aggressively advocate for a bigger public defense budget, as the need for strong public defense is critical to the city's post-pandemic recovery. At this critical juncture, the Public Defender's Office is a powerful generator of criminal justice reform in the city. I have the vision, community support, and political will to lead my office in spearheading innovative new policies to undo decades of bad policymaking that created the unsustainable conditions in the first place. As Public Defender, my record reflects my commitment to delivering the critical services necessary to achieve a healthy & sustainable society. If re-elected I will continue to mobilize my office to provide our clients with the best services in the country so that they can succeed and contribute to the health and wellness of our city.

If elected, do you commit to completing your entire term?

Yes I commit to completing the full term.

## What are your values, and how did you get them?

My bold and innate value for community stems from the deeply impactful role that community care played in my family's journey. Through the power of community, my father became the first in his family to finish high school. This eventually gave him the means to immigrate to the United States with my mother, where I continue this legacy of care and strive to be a vessel through which people can actualize and avail it to help undo mass incarceration. As the only elected Public Defender in the state, the office I am running for entails being close, accountable, and responsible to the public.

I also am committed to excellence. Our clients deserve the best. The impact of our work affects individuals, families, and subsequent generations. Excellent representation can go a long way toward avoiding wrongful convictions and / or deportations.

I also value creativity. The best representation is not enough to undo mass incarceration. As the only elected Public Defender in the state, I am committed to pushing truthful narrative work and policy initiatives to move the bar forward toward undoing carceral practices.

I believe the most fundamental aspect of a Public Defender's role is to truly see those who we represent, practice at a high level, and help facilitate a better trajectory for those we serve. The public defender is uniquely situated to affect policy and empower community members because we see the reality of everyone impacted on a daily basis. This has dispensed me with critical and distinct perspectives to effectively center community needs in the creation and expansion of our programs and resources offered to our clients.

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## What communities do you represent, and how do they hold you accountable?

As Public Defender, I represent individuals who are not financially able to employ counsel, including BIPOC and LGBTQ communities who are excessively targeted by our legal system. The right to counsel is a guaranteed right in this country to ensure that low-income individuals are not denied their due process rights and fair representation in the courtroom.

These communities I represent have inspired me to take bold and innovative action. Low-income individuals are the most impacted by financially inaccessible forms of civic engagement, such as jury duty. Because income inequality is strongly correlated with race and ethnicity, the voices of our POC community members are largely missing from our juries. To alleviate these financial barriers to civic engagement in our city and in turn make our judicial processes fairer, I proposed the first of its kind "Be the Jury" program to ensure that the size of one's wallet doesn't stop them from having representation in our legal system. The communities I represent hold me accountable by impelling me to redefine, reimagine, and push the envelope on criminal justice reform through bold and unprecedented action necessary to challenge the oppressive systems that have impacted the communities I represent for far too long.

I have also pioneered the qualification of "community experts" in trials. Many times, there is a large gap between jurors' understanding and the worlds of some clients. Community experts help bridge that gap and keep the legal community accountable.

Also, because of my close community connections, many reach out to me directly if there are concerns with my office.

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What three endorsements are you most proud of?

I am most proud to be endorsed by the San Francisco Democratic Party, the San Francisco Labor Council, and the Rose Pak Democratic Club.

What are the top three issues you will work on, and how will you implement solutions in a timely manner?

The top 3 issues I will address are community health, racialized economic inequality & housing insecurity. Our clients are deeply impacted by all of them, and therefore our office must play a pivotal role in dismantling the conditions that contribute to the crisis. Studies have proven that tough-on-crime policies do nothing to improve public safety and that on the contrary, they deepen racial & economic disparities leading to worse public safety outcomes. To address these issues, our office must provide strong & aggressive public defense to keep clients out of jail & connect them with critical services like stable employment, secure housing & healthcare. Under my leadership, my office has tackled these issues head-on. The Clean Slate & End the Cycle programs in my office connect clients with social workers & provide linkages and open pathways to critical services like employment, housing and healthcare to unchain them from a life of constant precarity. Further, we plan to build out and lead "circle" practices that can lead to restorative justice opportunities. If re-elected, I plan to build on this work and expand our services.

What for-profit or non-profit boards do you serve on, including political organizations?

I serve on the San Francisco Democratic Party and the Board of the National Association for Public Defense.

What local and state commissions or policy bodies do you serve on?

I have a seat on the reentry council in San Francisco.

Please describe specific accomplishments in your activism. What did you get done, and what was your role?

I've taken creative and unprecedented approaches to deeply embedded problems in our legal system such as, the Be the Jury program that helps break down economic barriers to promote a diverse jury pool, the Youth Defender program which provides paid internships to at-risk youth, & the Freedom Project which challenges excessive & wrongful sentences. I've also tripled the capacity of the Clean Slate Program, scaled up the Immigration Unit & directed resources to enhance our policy advocacy. I've created new positions & opportunities for growth to meet our workforce needs & hired diverse & experienced talent to carry out my vision. In the face of backlogged courts and delayed justice, I'm pursuing every means necessary, including a lawsuit against SF Superior Court and public pressure, to enable my office to fulfill our obligation to our clients and ensure their 6th Amendment rights to a speedy trial. I am a founding member of Public Defenders for Racial Justice. We cannot end mass incarceration without ending racial disparities, as both issues are deeply intertwined. I support a strong Racial Justice Committee in our office and have encouraged the forming of affinity groups in the office. I'm redefining how public defenders serve their community by extending our reach beyond the walls of the courtroom towards pathways that enact reforms, including policymaking, organizing and legislative action.

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Please list specific ways you have shown up for immigrants at risk of deportation.

My office is only the third public defender's office in the nation to offer legal representation for immigrant detainees in removal proceedings. Unlike in criminal court, non-citizens in immigration detention do not have the right to court-appointed counsel, and without the Immigration Unit, many would be forced to defend themselves against government trained prosecutors. In May of 2017, the office launched the Immigration Unit, which includes an innovative team representing local residents locked in detention facilities and facing deportation. The unit was formed in response to the Trump Administration's threats of mass deportation of undocumented San Franciscans, many of them longtime residents who work, attend school and contribute to the city. During my time in office, I have grown the capacity of the Immigration Unit to include class action work that has led to the release of immigrants facing inhumane conditions in immigration detention during the COVID pandemic. Also, I have brought in leaders such as Angela Chan to lead our policy unit to take direct action to challenge the deportation of our clients by pushing for legislation such as the Vision Act.

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Please list specific ways you have fought against racism and white supremacy.

The criminal justice system is deeply racist and unjust. I believe the Public Defender's Office plays a critical role in dismantling these conditions. As Public Defender I've spearheaded the Be the Jury pilot program that helps break down economic barriers to promote a diverse jury pool by paying economically disadvantaged jurors \$100 a day for participating in juries. In SF, gang injunctions have been deployed in historically Black and Latinx working-class neighborhoods, leading to indiscriminate racial profiling and criminalization of youth of color. Under my leadership, my office will continue to vigorously challenge gang enhancements in court to stop the arbitrary, unfair & excessive criminalization of poor people of color. Due to my success in winning cases where gang allegations have been filed, I have lectured state-wide on debunking stereotypes and embracing community experts to win gang cases. My goal is to continue to deepen the practice and expand the range of the San Francisco Public Defender's Office. I'm obsessed with better courtroom practice and results for our largely Black and Brown clients, and plan to continue training so that advocates can better their individual practices. Further, I look forward to scaling up data, and communications, to effectively measure outcomes such as shorter probation terms and linkages of our clients to our Clean Slate program to reduce the generational impact of convictions.

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Please give us some examples of situations you've encountered where gender and LGBTQ inequity was evident and what you did or would do to address it.

I have expanded our office's collaboration with the non-profit MAGIC programs to scale up opportunities for LGBTQ youth to thrive while hopefully avoiding criminal systems-involvement. We've increased our policy advocacy in order to collaborate with allied interests around mental health services, housing, and health & education services for vulnerable residents, including our LGBTQ clients & their families.

I've addressed gender and LGBTQ inequity in leadership by promoting women and LGBTQ-identified individuals in units across the office.

Our Office's award-winning Immigration Unit is currently advocating for the release from Saleshe Prasad, a LGBTQ immigrant from Fiji and a survivor of child sex abuse, who is in ICE detention after the state prison turned him over when he earned parole. We collaborated with Sup. Ronan to pass a resolution at the Board of Supervisors urging that Gov. Newsom pardon him and also got his op-ed. "Let's Not Forget about LGBTQ immigrants in ICE detention," published with the SF Bay Area Reporter.

In 2020, we also litigated against ICE to secure the release of LGBT client Lexis Hernandez Avilez, a 41-year-old transgender woman who spent the last 17 months detained by ICE, most recently in Texas.

In May, we recently worked with TGI Justice Project to give a training to our staff on how we, as attorneys, social workers, investigators, paralegals and clerks, can better serve our transgender, gender-variant and intersex clients, particularly those who are incarcerated. The training addressed issues facing transgender clients in SF Courts and Jails, tips on how to improve our advocacy for our clients, and also what types of culturally competent resources exist out there for our transgender clients upon release from jail or prison. The training was given by Zyaire Nassirah (he/him) is a prison abolitionist, advocate, and organizer, and Alex Binsfeld (they/them) is a nonbinary, queer person who was born and raised in the San Francisco Bay Area.

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Amid a homelessness crisis, how can the City and County of San Francisco improve the effectiveness of our city's homelessness and supportive housing services?

Our clients are deeply impacted by housing insecurity & income inequality, and therefore our office must play a pivotal role in dismantling the conditions that contribute to the housing unaffordability crisis. This includes directing resources to expand the End the Cycle program I've created that connects clients with comprehensive wraparound housing, educational & healthcare services. I plan to hire more culturally competent social workers to ramp up our policy advocacy efforts to connect individuals to housing options.

I believe housing is a human right and that everyone in San Francisco deserves access to safe, stable & permanently affordable housing. I supported Dean Preston's 2020 ballot measure Prop I that doubled the transfer tax on multi-million dollar properties to fund affordable housing. I believe the City & housing nonprofits must use the revenue from Prop I to acquire & build new units to solve the affordable housing crisis in San Francisco. With more affordable housing stock in the city, our clients will have more opportunities to find stable & affordable housing. I also support the San Francisco Rent Ordinance and tenants universal right to counsel in eviction proceedings.

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What is your favorite park, and why?

I like Glen Park because it offers a space to chill, a playspace for kids and a beautiful hiking option.

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Is there anything else you want to tell us?

Public Defender work is a calling for me. I am obsessed with raising the level of practice in the field because our clients deserve the best. Due to my trial successes, I have been invited to lecture statewide and nationally on aspects of public defender practice. Just as I always had growth-mindset with my own practice, I am constantly trying to scale-up what we can accomplish organizationally. I have initiated systematic changes to provide opportunities for more robust and higher-level litigation practice.

As the elected public defender, I am trying to take the best from organizational development theory to raise our office, already considered the best in the country, to the next level. We are off to a great start. A few examples: I began a Break the Cycle initiative to use culturally competent social workers to connect system-impacted individuals immediately with service soon after arrest. I sought funding for a Freedom Project and an Integrity Unit to challenge unjust convictions or excessively harsh sentences and to develop the country's first public police-misconduct database connected to a public defender office. We fought for legislative changes to limit probation terms that interfered with full reentry into society.

Internally, I have developed growth opportunities for support staff by creating leads from within the ranks of investigators, paralegals, and social workers. I have also created more growth opportunities in units throughout the office. Finally, we have had unprecedented budget wins the last two years that will both add to our ranks in our core defense practice while also adding to our systems-change efforts and operational efficiency.

Despite dealing with the unique situation of leading a public defender office in a pandemic, I am proud that we continue to nurture an aggressive courtroom practice while also initiating several first-in-the country initiatives.

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Public Defender



What experience do you have with the Public Defender's office and Criminal Defense in general?

I acquired a JD from UC Berkeley Law School & began my legal career as a labor lawyer. I soon realized my true calling in fighting for the underdog. I joined the Contra Costa Public Defender's Office, dedicating 7 years to aggressively defending clients charged with misdemeanors & felonies. Impressed with my work, Jeff Adachi hired me to work at the SF Public Defender's Office where I continued working as a line attorney before being promoted as Director of Training & then Manager of the Felony Unit. I now serve as the Elected Public Defender of San Francisco. I'm proud of the unique programs I've implemented such as, the Be the Jury program that helps break down economic barriers to promote a diverse jury pool, the Young Defender program which provides paid internships to at-risk youth, & the Freedom Project which challenges excessive & wrongful sentences. I've also tripled the capacity of the Clean Slate Program, scaled up the Immigration Unit & directed resources to enhance our policy advocacy. I've created new positions & opportunities for growth to meet our workforce needs & hired diverse & experienced talent to carry out my vision. If re-elected I will aggressively advocate for a bigger budget, as the need for strong public defense in our city is now more important than ever. I am seeking re-election to implement my vision to continue improving our office, which is widely considered the best in the country.

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What policies would you keep in place from your predecessor, and what would you change?

My goal is to continue to deepen the practice and expand the range of the San Francisco Public Defender's Office. I will continue to achieve better courtroom practice and results for our largely Black and Brown clients, and plan to continue training so that advocates can better their individual practices. Further, I look forward to scaling up data, and communications, to effectively measure outcomes such as shorter probation terms and link more clients to our Clean Slate program to reduce the generational impact of convictions.

I am keeping an emphasis on trial practice, but have instituted better management and coaching structures to ensure better development of quality, in addition to quantity of motions, trials, and other aspects of defense practice.

While I am committed to diversity as my predecessor was, I am furthering that by fostering affinity groups and concerted DEI initiatives.

We are maintaining our MAGIC youth development initiatives, but by promoting Lyslynn Lacoste, the ED of BMAGIC, to be my Chief of Staff, we are making the office as a whole more of a community law office without sacrificing our strength as litigators.

My predecessor was interested in management theory. I am drawing from the newest strategic planning models to scale up the offensive aspect of a public defender's office. I am in the process of developing three-year strategic plans with measurable outcomes. Our work is too vital, and, therefore, I am drawing from the best of management theory in order to provide the greatest possible representation and policy advocacy for those we represent and their families.

I plan to implement creative programs to dismantle inequities that fuel mass incarceration— programs which Public Defenders can replicate across the nation. I've already laid the groundwork to implement my vision by expanding our budget the last two budget cycles. My decarceration agenda includes directing resources to expand the End the Cycle program I've created that provides comprehensive wraparound services to our clients, the Youth Defender Program that provides paid internships to public school youth, the Integrity Unit that spotlights police misconduct, the Freedom Project that challenges excessive sentences & wrongful convictions.

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If elected, what would your budget priorities for the Public Defender's office be, and what is your vision for fully funding those?

As trusted advocates for our clients, public defenders are the best positioned out of all justice and safety agencies to help community members transition out of the criminal system for good. Yet we remain the most underfunded agency in the city's criminal legal system. The San Francisco Public Defender's Office receives about half the amount of funding compared to the District Attorney's Office. Public defenders receive six times less than the Sheriff's Department, and 14 times less than the San Francisco Police Department. This problem of overfunding law enforcement and drastically underfunding public defender offices is not unique to San Francisco. This is a national and long-standing issue that is by design and reflects the racist and classist underpinnings of our criminal system.

I have expanded the public defense budget in the last two budget cycles. Appropriately funding the Public Defender's Office will increase our capacity to better serve our clients and alleviate the burdensome caseloads our defenders carry to the detriment of their own well-being; enable us to implement recently passed state criminal justice reforms like the Racial Justice Act; and allow us to expand many of the innovative programs we created to heal the impact of system involvement for our clients and their families — such as early representation through our Pre-Trial Release Unit, connecting people to services through our Reentry Unit, and expanding our Clean Slate Program to help people expunge or seal their records to open up opportunities for jobs and housing. If re-elected I will continue to aggressively advocate for a bigger budget, as the need for strong public defense in our city is now more important than ever.

What metrics would you use to determine your success as Public Defender?

The most important metric is the conversations with clients and their family members and direct feedback for the work that we do. Another metric is the success and sustainability of some of the unique programs that I have described above. Further, I am constantly looking to develop further quantitative metrics such as case outcomes and probation lengths while also measuring quality by scaling up to appropriate management ratios that have long been too high according to accepted ratios in management theory.

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