

**APPELLATE DEFENDER COMMISSION MEETING  
MINUTES**

JUNE 17, 2026  
SADO DETROIT  
12:00 P.M.

Commissioners: Judith Gracey, Honorable Michael Hatty, John Hiemstra, Brandy Robinson, Aaron Suganuma, Janet Welch, and Darryl Woods

SADO/MAACS: Director Marilena David, Direct Appeals Managing Attorney Angeles Meneses, Managing Attorney Brett DeGroff, Juvenile Lifer Unit Managing Attorney Jackie Ouvry, Claire Ward, Criminal Defense Resource Manager, Kathy Swedlow, Fernando Gaitan, Bryan Vance, Chelsea Richardson, Beth Kuzma, Wendy Dealca, Mary Soo Anderson, Deputy Director Private Counsel/MAACS Administrator Keeley Blanchard, Stephanie Farkas, and Commission Secretary MariaRosa Palmer

SADO Staff: Emma Lawton and Morgan Miller

**WELCOME**

Chair Judith Gracey called the meeting to order at 12:15 p.m. and welcomed everyone to the meeting. Chair Gracey also noted that the meeting will follow Roberts Rule of Order.

**PUBLIC COMMENT**

UAW Representative Emma Lawton informed the Commission that bargaining dates have been set to discuss Fiscal Year 2028 wages.

**APPROVAL OF MINUTES FROM THE MEETING ON MARCH 15, 2026**

*Commissioner Welch moved to approve the minutes of March 17, 2025, seconded by Commissioner Hatty. Carried.*

## UPDATES:

Budget and Hiring: Marilena David shared an update on the budget for Fiscal Year 2026-2027. Ms. David is hopeful there will be signed budget soon. She also added that a letter was sent to the State Budget Office advising them of the current assignment crisis, in hopes for some additional funding for direct appeals. Once the budget is received, Ms. David will provide an update.

Hiring: SADO currently has 111 staff members with 2 open positions – a general clerk and record specialist. Four attorneys will join the Direct Appeals Unit in September.

She also informed the Commission of the following changes in leadership:

- Tina Olson has stepped down as a Managing Attorney for the JLU
- Claire Ward was promoted as Managing Attorney for the Juvenile Lifer Unit.
- Katherine Marcus has shifted to an Assistant Defender
- Michael Mittlestat was promoted to a Managing Attorney for Direct Appeals

Lansing Move: Ms. David informed the Commission that the Lansing Office move is complete and thanked everyone involved for a successful move. The new building has had some new challenges, dodging a flood due to river water levels during the rainy weather and the office had a break in.

Unit Updates: Leadership shared their unit updates:

- SADO Direct Appeals: Brett DeGroff provided an update on the Direct Appeal Unit.
  - **Interns:** The unit currently has four interns working with the unit. Mr. DeGroff thanked Kristin Lavoy for coordinating the internship program.
  - **Training:** Ten attorneys are currently in training, with several expected to assume a full caseload in the near future. Mr. DeGroff also reported that four new Direct Appeal attorneys will begin in September, three of whom are former interns.
  - **Michigan Office of the Appellate Defender (MOAA):** Mr. DeGroff highlighted the unit's recent successes before the Michigan Supreme Court.
- Juvenile Lifer Unit: Jackie Ouvry provided an update on the Juvenile Lifer Unit. The unit recently celebrated its 300th resentencing. The team responsible for reaching this milestone was recognized with a baseball signed by the unit. She also reported

that 106 Parks/Poole clients have been resentenced, with many having been discharged or becoming eligible for a parole hearing.

Regarding staffing, Claire Ward will transition into a Managing Attorney role. Staff have also participated in additional training, including Death Penalty training in Iowa and Gideon's Promise. Lastly, there are currently 340 Czarnecki/Taylor clients who have counsel, while approximately 240 individuals are still awaiting appointment of an attorney.

- CDRC: Kathy Swedlow provided an update on the CDRC, the education arm of SADO. The unit provides virtual training for public defenders throughout the state. She also reported that CDRC has provided training for prison law libraries. The unit is currently updating its publications and anticipates having new books available soon.
- MAACS: Keeley Blachard reported that MAACS continues to experience capacity issues. Currently, 264 individuals are awaiting appointment of an attorney, a number that has increased since 2024 and is expected to continue rising. Ms. Blachard noted that MAACS leadership continues to advocate for additional resources. She also reported that changes to the billing policy and the new paid onboarding training has resulted in eight additional attorneys joining the roster. To date, these attorneys have accepted 27 assignments.

#### Commission Subcommittees

Chair Gracey created two subcommittees.

**Delay of Appointments Subcommittee** to work alongside Keeley and MAACS staff to understand the challenges of the delay in finding counsel for assignments.

- Commissioner Brandy Robinson
- Commissioner Darryl Woods
- Commissioner Conor

**Director's Evaluation Subcommittee** to work on the review of the Director's performance review and report at the next meeting.

- Commissioner Janet Welch
- Commissioner Judge Hatty
- Commissioner John Hiemstra

## **Action Items**

### **2025 Annual Report**

SADO requested the Commission approve and publish the 2025 SADO Annual Report.

***Commissioner Hatty moved to approve and publish the 2025 SADO Annual Report, second by Commissioner Woods. Carried.***

### **SPENDING APPROVALS**

#### **Bellwether Public Relations**

SADO requested the Commission approve a 12-month contract with Bellwether Public Relations for \$36,000.

***Commissioner Hatty moved to approve of spending \$36,000 for a 12-month contract with Bellwether Public Relations, seconded by Commissioner Robinson. Carried.***

### **AWARD NOMINATIONS**

SADO and MAACS requested the approval of the 2026 Appellate Defender Commission award nominations.

- Barbara Levine Award for Excellence in Appellate Advocacy (presented to an outstanding MAACS Roster Attorney). MAACS nominated Attorney Susan Walsh.
- Norris Thomas Award for Excellence in Appellate Advocacy (presented to outstanding SADO Attorney). SADO nominated Direct Appeals Attorney Emma Lawton.
- Amanda Smith Award for excellence in Serving our Mission and Values (presented to an outstanding member of SADO's staff). SADO nominated Heather Waara from the CDRC unit.

***Commissioner Woods moved to accept and approve the nominations for the Appellate Defender Commission awards, seconded by Commissioner Welch. Carried.***

## **New Boris Root Award**

SADO requested the creation of a new award to recognize exemplary excellence in collaborative defense. This award would be presented to one member in mitigation, investigation or reentry. There are currently 24 eligible staff members.

***Commissioner Welch moved to approve the new Boris Root award, seconded by Commissioner Hatty. Carried.***

Before adjourning the meeting, Chair Gracey recognized the 2025 SADO staff milestone anniversaries.

The meeting adjourned at 1:32 pm.

Respectfully submitted,

MariaRosa J. Palmer  
SADO

APPELLATE DEFENDER COMMISSION

BY: \_\_\_\_\_  
Judith S. Gracey, Chair