

**Potrero Hill Democratic Club
Public Defender Candidate Appearance
Tuesday, August 30, 2022 on Zoom**

Candidate Questionnaire

Candidate name: Rebecca Susan Feng Young
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*Please write a brief response (up to 200 words) to each question. **Please email the completed questionnaire to contact_us@phdemclub.org by Sunday, August 28.** The questionnaires will be made available online to club members.*

1. Why are you running and why should we vote for you?

I am running for public defender to bring the office focus back to its core mission of vigorous and compassionate, client-centered representation, and to restore transparency and integrity to the Public Defender's Office.

It's time the PD's office was led by a strong, experienced, hard-working, visionary woman of color who will lift and inspire the attorneys and staff by supporting their work on the frontlines to provide the best defense money can't buy.

For the past three years, the incumbent has strayed from the core mission. A bloated management structure now exists at the expense of depleting the frontline attorneys and other staff who carry the office on their backs. The incumbent and his top leader have consistently devalued contributions by and marginalized strong women, resulting in female leaders disengaging (or quitting) from the toxic environment they created. The incumbent has demonstrated a stunning lack of leadership during his 3-year tenure, leaving the office rudderless among layers of middle management, with morale at an all-time low, while remaining disconnected from the line attorneys and staff who do the heavy lifting each day.

- A. I Am the Best Candidate For Public Defender Because Of My Trial, Leadership And Community Experience.**

Public defender work is a calling. My childhood experiences confronting daily racial attacks in middle & high school laid the groundwork for my life's work fighting racial injustice. As the child of a parent from China, I learned early the challenges facing immigrants coming here for a better life or for safety. Though those attacks were years ago, the memory of the shock to my consciousness remains. Below is a summary of why I am the most qualified person to lead the Public Defender's Office.

Community Leadership

From 2014 to 2021, I co-chaired the Pub Def Racial Justice Committee (Office-wide group) and in 2015, I co-founded Public Defenders for Racial Justice (Bay Area-wide). In PDRJ, I produced three seminars to train public defenders to litigate using a racial justice lens. I have brought Clean Slate community days to the Bayview, and produced the first ever, “Meet Your Public Defender” Day. For the last six years I worked on two SFPD working groups (Body Worn Camera, and Bias, Pedestrian & Car Stops) to help change the Departmental General Orders.

Trial Experience

Trial work is where public defenders show their mettle. One cannot become a skilled and respected public defender without going to trial regularly.

I have tried over 60 cases in state, federal and juvenile court, including eight murder trials to verdict. Under Jeff Adachi’s training, my trial practice transformed. The example he set needs to continue if the San Francisco Public Defender Office is to maintain the greatness for which it was once known. My trial work includes a vigorous, pretrial litigation practice and I build a team around my clients so that they always feel supported and loved. I want my clients to know they have Gideon’s Army at their backs.

Management Experience

I have the management experience to make sure the attorneys and staff have the resources to competently represent every client.

For six years I co-managed 52 attorneys in the felony trial unit under Jeff Adachi’s leadership and implemented the office’s first system for tracking and balancing caseloads. I mentored dozens of young attorneys and interns, and wrote the first goals and objectives for the felony trial attorneys. I have worked in nearly every area of the office. See below:

- **19 years as a Public Defender**
 - 6 Years – Felony Trial Manager, 52 Attorneys
- 3 Years – Homicide Unit
- 6 Years – Felony Trial Rotation
- 3 Years – Research & Writing Unit
- 1 Year – Manager of Collaborative and Specialty Courts
 - + 16 years Private Defense Practice
 - + Over 60 trials in State, Federal and Juvenile Court, including (8) murder cases to verdict
 - + Founding member, Women Defenders
 - + **Committee Work as a Public Defender:**
 - Co-chair, Racial Justice Committee, San Francisco Public Defender
 - Co-chair, Public Defenders for Racial Justice
 - Member, BASF Criminal Justice Task Force
 - Member, Mayor Ed Lee’s Body Worn Camera Working Group
 - Member, SFPD Biased Policing Working Group

- Editor, SB 1437, Legislation to Reform Felony Murder Rule
- Editor, AB 333, Legislation to narrow the application of the gang statute
- Statewide trainer, SB 2542, Racial Justice Act
- Trained and mentored by Jeff Adachi
- Clinical Professor, Criminal Defender Clinic, New College School of Law

2. What sets you apart from your opponent?

I would be a more present, more engaged leader. I would also do the following:

- Make sure lawyers are prepared to handle the cases being assigned to them and that they have the resources they need to thrive as people and advocates
- Restore Jeff Adachi's model of zealous advocacy tempered by experience and integrity
- Immediately reduce caseloads by increasing attorneys in the Felony Trial Unit
- Commit to increasing diversity in the office with training to develop the next generation of leaders
- Stay connected to the communities that the Public Defender serves
- Work with our justice partners to eliminate racial inequality in outcomes and pretrial detention
- Acknowledge to all staff (not only the lawyers) that their contributions and their experience matters

This all seems so obvious, *but it is not what is happening now*, which is why so many people in the office begged me to run.

I am committed to leading the San Francisco Public Defender's Office with the utmost integrity, remaining involved in the communities we serve and instilling an inclusive model of leadership that prepares the next generation of attorneys and managers to maintain the high standards that Jeff Adachi cultivated.

3. What do you see as the top three issues for San Francisco as they relate to the Public Defender's office? How would you as the Public Defender go about addressing these concerns?

1. Homelessness, 2. Inadequate resources for treating those with mental health challenges & 3. No safe injection sites.

Approximately 38% of San Francisco Public Defender clients are unhoused. Most of them are charged with misdemeanors. Housing insecurity must be addressed by our attorneys and social workers if we are to provide wrap-around services - a hallmark of client-centered representation. A good public defender must address the cycles of trauma, drug addiction, mental illness, and homelessness that bring so many of our clients into the criminal legal system.

San Francisco has the money to competently address our homeless crisis, but it lacks the political will. We are truly at a crisis point.

If elected, I would work with the Mayor's office, HSS, and the Probation Department to implement a long-term solution that included housing in four separate hotels (1 – women; 1- men; 1 – coed for couples; 1- dual diagnosis), plus push for safe injection sites and two more navigation centers that included showers, food and health care.

Working with churches and community groups, I would organize a united front to keep pressure on these City agencies to make housing a priority. This long-vision project is doable and has citizenry support. Every San Franciscan I speak with has compassion for people struggling with mental health crises and housing insecurity. San Francisco has many bright lights who want to work together to address this tragedy. We must work together to funnel resources into the project with dedicated, honest civil servants doing the work.

4. If you are the incumbent, what accomplishments are you most proud of?

5. If you are the challenger, describe something the incumbent did that you would have done differently.

If elected, I am committed to strengthening professional advancement for Black and brown attorneys and staff. The incumbent appointed 3 women - two had no previous experience as public defenders, or even as private criminal defense attorneys - to brand new, top-salary positions without opening up these positions to a transparent, competitive process so that *women in the office with decades of valuable experience could apply for them*. By appointing his friends who lack the necessary experience, the incumbent has brought about enormous resentment and morale has never been lower.

I am committed to bringing people up **from within, who have shown their commitment to our clients, to doing the hard trial work and to the community.**

One of my first steps as Public Defender will be to create written policies regarding advancement and promotion that are based on *experience, trial work, job performance and community involvement*. With these values as guidelines, BIPOC will not be excluded from promotions and will be able to be elevated to management from within. Currently, advancements and promotions are based entirely on cronyism. Thus, the office is being destroyed from within.

I am committed to increasing diversity in the office *with training* to develop the next generation of leaders. Thus, I will implement training programs, using outside trainers, to center people of color for leadership opportunities.

6. What is your position on gang injunctions and their effectiveness? What are other alternatives that could be explored to help decrease street violence?

I am opposed to gang injunctions because they further disrupt and disenfranchise communities of color. Gang injunctions, gang charges and gang allegations are manifestations of white supremacy, and I would advocate against them.

Gang injunctions perpetuate larger society's perception that Black and brown people are dangerous and need to be isolated. Gang injunctions only help the police stigmatize youth of color.

Gang injunctions can easily become a tool of oppression for those in the police department who are unaware of their implicit biases against Black and brown men. I have seen gang injunctions used this way during my years as a public defender and before during my years in private practice.

Finally, gang injunctions do nothing to engender trust between those communities impacted by them and the police.

The best way for long-lasting prevention of street violence is to prioritize education beginning at age 5 *for everyone*. We must put tremendous resources into our K-12 classrooms, starting with teacher's salaries. Second, every classroom should have a TA and each grade should have two social workers assigned. After-school tutoring should be free and mandatory for anyone getting below a B in any subject.

We need to restore trades programs in every high school. We need to ask each union to help establish apprenticeship programs and to offer summer internships with stipends.

High school counseling and mentoring should be abundant and free, and the arts and sports must be emphasized equally to reading, writing and arithmetic.

7. What is your position on recall elections?

I am opposed to recall elections. The only exception would be a recall for malfeasance while in office. Otherwise, recalls are a tremendous waste of taxpayer money and government resources.

Recall elections are anti-democratic and tend to be fueled exclusively by corporate moneyed interests against candidates who stand for progressive values and who are inclusive in their governance. This was true for the ouster of the great Chief Justice of the State of California, Rose Bird in 1986, and it was true for DA Chesa Boudin in 2022.

8. What is the appropriate relationship between the District Attorney's office and the Public Defender's office? Can the adversarial system leave room for respect between the two sides?

It's the public defender's job to fight the power. This was Jeff Adachi's constant message, and I worked with him as he built a Public Defender Office that became the model across the country for the delivery of indigent services.

Adachi's leadership was fierce, indefatigable, and visionary. *Every* DA respected him. He trained his attorneys to not short-change preparation and to not surrender to the system's pressure to plead our clients. He led by example. Sadly, that is not happening now. The relationship between the District Attorneys and Public Defenders should always be: Fear but with mad respect.

But this does not and need not preclude a collaborative relationship regarding topics and issues on which we must work together, such as the Innocence Project and recalling decades-long sentences.