

OFFICE OF THE PUBLIC DEFENDER (OPD)
NJ CONTINUING LEGAL EDUCATION PROGRAM
Jennifer N. Sellitti, NJ Public Defender
Lauren Petty, OPD Director of Training



Latino Voices on Justice: New Jersey Perspectives, Past and Present
A Hispanic Heritage Month Celebration and Panel Discussion

1.5 NJ Ethics (DEIB) CLE credits; 1 PA Ethics CLE credits
via Teams webinar and in-person OPD Training Library, Trenton

September 23, 2026
11:00 am-12:15 pm

Agenda

Panelists: Yesenia Lopez, Director of the New Jersey Hispanic Research and Information Center
Johnny Cardona, Deputy Public Defender, OPD Bergen Trial Region
Felipe Chavana, Director of Essex-Newark Legal Services
Rudy Rodas, Managing Director for Policy, Research, and Government Affairs at the New Jersey Economic Development Authority

Moderator: Lynette Renté, Asst. Public Defender

Topics:

- ✓ perspectives from public defense, civil legal services, historical research, economic policy, government affairs, and community advocacy
- ✓ how Latino individuals and families experience and navigate our legal systems, identify the barriers that can limit access and equitable outcomes
- ✓ ongoing efforts to advance access, equity, and justice.

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Presenters

Johnny Cardona, Esq.

Johnny Cardona, Esq. has served with the New Jersey Office of the Public Defender since 1996, beginning as an intern with the Middlesex County investigative unit while attending Rutgers University. After graduation, he joined the Essex County Public Defender's Office as an investigator, where he conducted a wide range of criminal investigations and was promoted to senior investigator. While managing a demanding caseload, he earned his law degree from New York Law School at night and was admitted to the NJ and NY bars in 2004.

That same year, Mr. Cardona became an Assistant Deputy Public Defender in Hudson County's Criminal Division. He represented clients in serious felony cases through every phase of litigation, earning a reputation for thorough preparation, skilled advocacy, and steady judgment in complex matters. During his time at the Hudson County office, Mr. Cardona was also assigned to the Pre-Trial Services Unit, where he oversaw Central Judicial Processing Court and Early Disposition Court and played a key role in the office's transition during Criminal Justice Reform.

In 2017, Mr. Cardona was promoted to First Assistant Deputy Public Defender in Hudson County, where he assisted in office administration and the supervision of attorneys, investigators, and support staff. In 2020, Mr. Cardona was promoted to Deputy of the Passaic County Public Defender's Office. In that leadership role, he oversaw day-to-day operations, provided mentorship and training to staff, coordinated with stakeholders across the criminal justice system, and ensured high-quality representation for clients. Under his leadership, the office successfully navigated significant transitions and maintained a strong presence in trial litigation.

In October 2024, Mr. Cardona transitioned to serve as the Deputy of the Bergen County Public Defender's Office, where he continues his commitment to excellent client advocacy, staff development, and collaborative leadership. He is also a member of the New Jersey Supreme Court Committee on Wellness in the Law, contributing to statewide efforts to support attorney well-being and foster a healthier legal profession.

Felipe Chavana, Esq.

Born in New York City, **Felipe Chavana** was raised in the South Bronx. He completed his undergraduate studies at the University of Puerto Rico and then graduated from Rutgers Law School in 1976. Felipe's legal career has been dedicated to seeking justice for the poor and disadvantaged. Since 1989 he has served as Executive Director of the Essex-Newark Legal Services Program, ensuring the quality and availability of legal representation to Essex County's low-income residents. He is the recipient of the LSJNJ J. Harris David Career Services to People in Poverty Award (2003).

Yesenia López

Yesenia López is a nationally recognized librarian, archivist, and community leader dedicated to preserving and advancing the history and cultural heritage of New Jersey's Latino communities. She is Director of the New Jersey Hispanic Research & Information Center (NJHRIC) at The Newark Public Library, where she oversees the Puerto Rican Community Archives, Hispanic Reference Collection, and La Sala Hispanoamericana.

López became the first Latina archivist in New Jersey when she earned her Master of Library and Information Science with a Certificate in Advanced Studies in Archives and Records Management from Long Island University in 2007. Prior to becoming NJHRIC Director, she spent 15 years building the Puerto Rican Community Archives into a significant repository of New Jersey Latino history.

Her work encompasses community archives, oral history, digitization, exhibitions, bilingual programming, mentorship, and professional leadership. A longtime member and leader within REFORMA, López is committed to developing the next generation of library and information professionals and ensuring that Latino history is preserved, accessible, and recognized as an essential part of New Jersey's story.

Lynette Renté, Esq.

As Assistant Public Defender of the NJOPD's Office of Parental Representation (OPR), **Lynette Renté** oversees the agency's efforts to provide high-quality legal representation to parents and families involved in the family regulation system, with a focus on strengthening and reunifying families across the state. She manages a dynamic team of attorneys across eight offices, driving forward strategic initiatives that ensure parents receive the comprehensive, zealous advocacy they deserve.

Lynette's professional journey with NJOPD began when she joined the agency as Assistant Deputy Public Defender in OPR's Northeast Region Office. There she was able to advocate for members of the community where she was raised and lived, Hudson County.. During her time as a trial attorney, she represented parents in complex cases involving alleged abuse, neglect, and guardianship matters filed by the Division of Child Protection and Permanency (DCPP). She conducted agency wide trainings and for the Children in Court Improvement Committee under the Administrative Office of the Courts (AOC).

In 2022, Lynette was promoted to Deputy Public Defender of OPR's Northeast Region, where she managed the Hudson and Bergen regional offices and supervised a team of OPR and pool attorneys. In 2022, she was named a Unification Day Hero by Legal Services of New Jersey for her work with a Hudson County family. She also serves on the statewide Children in Court Improvement Committee under the AOC, focusing on improving legal processes for parents and children.

Lynette earned her J.D. from Rutgers Law School and her B.A. in political science and Spanish from Rutgers University. Her passion for advocating for parents was sparked during her judicial clerkship to the Honorable Robert A. Coogan, J.S.C., where she was exposed to the complexities of parental representation within the family regulation system.

Rudy Rodas, Esq.

Rudy A. Rodas, Esq. is a Guatemalan American attorney and public-sector leader who serves as a Managing Director in the Chief of Staff/External Affairs Division at the New Jersey Economic Development Authority. His broad portfolio includes government and legislative affairs, communications, international partnerships, and the Office of Strategic Defense Investment. He also advises senior leadership on external affairs, organizational priorities, and strategic initiatives advancing New Jersey's economic-development goals.

Rudy previously led statewide operations as State Director for U.S. Senators George Helmy and Bob Menendez. He also served as Associate Counsel to Governor Phil Murphy and as a bilingual Attorney-Advisor with the Social Security Administration. Earlier in his career, he maintained his own immigration law practice and served as Of Counsel to the Consulates General of Colombia in Newark and New York.

Raised in Trenton, Rudy earned his B.B.A. from George Washington University and his J.D. from Rutgers Law School. He was recognized by the Hispanic Nat'l Bar Assn. as one of its 2021 Top Attorneys Under 40. His civic involvement has included service on the Latino Action Network's Steering Committee and as chair of its Immigration Committee, as well as service on Hudson County Community College's President's Latino Advisory Council.

Jennifer N. Sellitti, NJ Public Defender

Jennifer N. Sellitti was sworn in as Public Defender on February 1, 2024, after Senate confirmation of her appointment to the position by Governor Murphy. Prior to becoming Public Defender, Jennifer served as Director of Training & Communications for OPD. She previously served as Deputy of OPD's Middlesex Trial Region and as an Assistant Deputy Public Defender in the Essex County Adult Region. Jennifer worked as a staff attorney for the Committee for Public Counsel Services in Massachusetts and as a Massachusetts Superior Court law clerk before joining OPD. She began her legal career at Massachusetts Correctional Legal Services, where she worked on the organization's Prison Brutality Project investigating claims of prison violence and representing inmates housed in solitary confinement at super maximum-security prisons in civil rights lawsuits. She had a career in marketing and public relations before becoming a lawyer.

Jennifer has trained lawyers in more than thirty-five states and speaks nationally about trial advocacy and transforming public defense systems. She is a trustee of the Association of Criminal Defense Lawyers of New Jersey, serves on the Advisory Board of New Jersey Institute of Technology's Forensic Science Major, and is a member of the New Jersey State Bar and the National Association of Criminal Defense Lawyers. She is graduate of Suffolk University Law School and obtained a B.S. degree in public relations from Boston University. When she is not advocating for public defender staff and clients, she operates *D/V Tenacious*, a dive vessel that locates, dives, and recovers artifacts from shipwrecks in the North Atlantic. Jennifer is a certified diver and a U.S.C.G. licensed ship captain. She is a New Jersey Maritime Museum trustee.