



MEDIA RELEASE

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September 14, 2020

Executive Director Selected to Head Los Angeles County's Groundbreaking Alternatives to Incarceration Initiative

Songhai Armstead, a longtime advocate for the underserved and an innovator within Los Angeles County's justice system, has been selected to head Los Angeles County's groundbreaking Alternatives to Incarceration Initiative.

As the office's first executive director, she will oversee implementation of recommendations to make "care first, jails last" a reality in Los Angeles County, coordinating among multiple departments and community stakeholders, and building on the findings of the [Alternatives to Incarceration Work Group](#).

The Alternatives to Incarceration Initiative (ATI) is part of the County's Chief Executive Office. Armstead is scheduled to retire from the Superior Court bench to begin her assignment in late September 2020.

"I am thrilled to learn of the hiring of Songhai Armstead to be our county's inaugural ATI Executive Director," said Dr. Robert K. Ross, president and CEO of the California Endowment, who chaired the ATI Work Group. "Ms. Armstead brings the right blend of personal, career, and justice reform experiences to lead our transformation efforts—to assert care as the first option, and jail as the last resort in our system."

Armstead, who was appointed to the Superior Court by Gov. Jerry Brown in 2015, has been instrumental in creating innovative programs that assist justice-involved veterans, people experiencing homelessness, and those with mental health and substance abuse disorders—all with a focus on getting people the treatment and housing resources they need to improve their lives and break the cycle of incarceration.

A gifted educator on the topic of implicit bias, she has trained hundreds of justice system participants, including justices of the California Supreme Court, on how powerful unseen biases shape lives and actions, and contribute to the perpetuation of systemic racism.

A graduate of the University of Nevada, Reno, Armstead earned her law degree at UCLA School of Law, where she was the first-ever African American female student body president. In her personal life, she overcame a tumultuous childhood that included stints in the foster care system and the now-closed MacLaren Hall Children's Center.

"I am honored to be selected for this great opportunity. I have been shaped by my own life experiences—and even more by being able to serve and listen to those most impacted by trauma and the justice system," Armstead said. "I look forward to bringing all of my energies to this important effort to create innovative alternatives for people who deserve to get well in the community, not in a jail cell."

Her appointment was applauded by those who've worked with her in the past as well as her new colleagues.

"Songhai is a great partner and advocate who rolls up her sleeves and really gets things done," said Anita Nelson, CEO of SRO Housing Corporation, an affordable housing developer and supportive service provider. "In the 15 years that I've known her, she has walked Skid Row, met the people, learned the issues and is truly committed to housing as a cornerstone of a stable and secure life. The County is fortunate to have her in this leadership capacity."

"People experiencing mental illness are far too often caught up in the criminal justice system. If we are going to break this cycle, we need visionary leaders like Songhai Armstead to help us find new pathways that recognize not just systemic racism but the need to overcome institutional barriers and truly meet our clients where they are," said Dr. Jonathan Sherin, director of the County Department of Mental Health.

"This is outstanding news! Songhai Armstead has a deep understanding and compassion for the indigent accused and the wisdom to make real sustained change from a system of overincarceration to 'care first, jails last.' She is a true partner in our efforts to find treatment and services that help people thrive," added Ricardo D. Garcia, Los Angeles County Public Defender. "Her commitment to justice and equity will allow public defenders to divert clients from the criminal justice system back to their homes and communities instead of jail cells."

Click [here](#) for a photo.

CONTACT: Countywide Communications, pio@ceo.lacounty.gov, (213) 974-1311