

## LOS ANGELES COUNTY DA JACKIE LACEY SETS UP UNIT TO INVESTIGATE INNOCENCE



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### LOS ANGELES --

The Los Angeles district attorney announced Monday that a team of veteran prosecutors will begin reviewing wrongful conviction claims from state prisoners who present new evidence of their innocence.

A newly established conviction review unit will join nearly two dozen other prosecutors' offices nationwide that now investigate claims of innocence, District Attorney Jackie Lacey said.

"In most of our cases, we have strong, credible evidence that the person committed the crime. But it's not perfect," Lacey said. "For those people who are in custody who are wrongfully convicted, we should not be resting until we make sure their cases are carefully looked at, especially when there's new evidence that sheds a different light on what we relied on in the past."

The unit will only review cases where someone who has always maintained their innocence is behind bars for a serious or violent felony. Inmates, attorneys or groups that seek to exonerate the wrongfully convicted can file a claim with the district attorney's office.

Michael Semanchik, staff attorney at California Innocence Project at California Western School of Law in San Diego, said the move should make it easier to present cases directly to prosecutors without having to file a case in court, which can take years to be resolved. His organization currently has eight Los Angeles cases to present to prosecutors.

"The DA has a duty to re-examine these cases," Semanchik said. "We always hoped they would. Hopefully, this will give us a greater opportunity to make our cases to them."

The Los Angeles County Board of Supervisors recently approved nearly \$1 million to establish the unit of the nation's largest district attorney's office, which has close to 1,000 prosecutors.

Assistant Head Deputy Ken Lynch, a 22-year veteran of the office who recently supervised gang prosecutions, will oversee two other deputy district attorneys, an investigator and a paralegal.

If a claim appears to have merit, a prosecutor and investigator will review transcripts and interview witnesses. A conviction review committee will examine questionable cases and

prosecutors will seek to have a conviction thrown out if they think the person is innocent.

The move follows similar initiatives by prosecutors in Dallas, Manhattan, Brooklyn and several California counties, including San Diego, Ventura and Contra Costa.

Semanchik said he was concerned Lacey's office won't consider cases where someone may have made a false confession or pleaded guilty to prevent harsher punishment.

Of the 1,619 convicts exonerated since 1987, false confessions were factors in 205 of those cases, according to The National Registry of Exonerations.

Lacey said those inmates can challenge their convictions through other legal avenues.