Yesterday was the 57th anniversary of the Supreme Court decision in Gideon v Wainwright.  On this day in 1963, the Supreme Court established the right to counsel in criminal cases.  Under ordinary circumstances, public defender offices across the country take the time to recognize and celebrate this decision. We also celebrate what has been accomplished in Massachusetts through the Committee for Public Counsel Services, while acknowledging that we still have much work to do. Our public defenders in all of our practice areas along with all of our supporting professionals fight every day for justice in individual cases and to bring systemic change to a system that is unfair to poor people and people of color.

These, however, are not ordinary circumstances. We are now dealing with a worldwide pandemic, which is exactly the kind of crisis in which the needs and safety of our marginalized communities are often overlooked.  I am proud to work with all of you who are continuing to give voice to our clients and fighting for justice in the midst of this unprecedented crisis. We are all working long hours to navigate the uncertain and inconsistent administration of justice as other stakeholder agencies work to figure out how to do their business.  The Courts may be closed except for “emergencies,” but you continue to do the work envisioned in the Gideon decision.

So while we are unable to take the time to properly celebrate the Gideon decision and Public Defense Week,  the current situation serves to highlight the importance of your work - to assure that our clients are treated fairly and equitably.  People and systems rarely make the best decisions when stressed.  Your voices are a critical mitigation to that problem.

We will celebrate later this year. In the meantime, I thank you for your passion and dedication that is on display every day on behalf of our clients and our clients communities.

Tomorrow I will you update you on the many actions CPCS has pursued since the onset of this crisis to protect and defend our clients.  Stay healthy and take care of yourselves.

Anthony J. Benedetti

Chief Counsel

Committee for Public Counsel Services