



In Chicago, a remarkable story is unfolding. At just 29 years old and with a mere three years of experience since graduating from DePaul Law School, Cierra Norris, despite her novice status, has achieved something that many seasoned criminal defense attorneys can only dream of. Over the past few weeks, she has succeeded in securing the release of nearly a dozen inmates from Cook County Jail.

Cook County Jail is not filled with individuals serving sentences for their crimes. Most of the inmates, although many have prior criminal records, are legally presumed innocent as they await trial and are unable to post bail.

With her unique blend of charm and a determined approach, Norris has persuaded several county judges to grant bond to numerous detainees, citing the risk of COVID-19. This endeavor began with a couple of her own clients facing criminal charges, and soon, she took up the cause of others.

While Norris's personal background is intriguing, she prefers to keep the focus on the broken system and the detainees at the heart of her mission. Her work revolves around Cook County Jail, which has become a focal point in the battle against COVID-19. The facility has seen hundreds of infections and several fatalities, prompting inmates to seek release on bond.

Norris recalled, "We managed to secure the release of seven people in the first week. Once news of our efforts spread, we started receiving requests to take on cases that weren't originally ours."

To make this happen, Norris reached out to public defenders and lawyers across the nation to gather examples of COVID-19 emergency motions, specifically tailored to Cook County. She initiated these efforts after the first positive COVID-19 case within the jail on March 22, remaining dedicated even when court proceedings were temporarily suspended. Norris and her team appeared before more than 20 different judges in over 20 hearings for various individuals.

The pace of her work has been relentless, and she is now gearing up for a second round of hearings to secure the release of more detainees. According to Norris, many of the individuals she has helped would likely remain incarcerated without their emergency motions, and she argues that her efforts have made a significant impact.

One of Norris's clients, Keith Spencer, who had been incarcerated on gun and drug possession charges, expressed his initial skepticism about being released on bond but shared concerns about his safety and health due to asthma.

While being an attorney was always Norris's aspiration, she didn't anticipate the roles she now finds herself in. She is deeply committed to preventing her clients from facing dire consequences and underscores the personal nature of her fight. Norris revealed that her motivation stems from her own experience as a single mother and the stark statistics suggesting a high likelihood of her son entering the criminal justice system due to his background.

Even as clients like Keith Spencer promise not to find themselves in similar situations again, Norris acknowledges the fear associated with being incarcerated. She emphasizes that the individuals she helps are not faceless criminals but uncles, brothers, sisters, nephews, and sons, all cloaked in the presumption of innocence.

As the coronavirus continues to impact Cook County Jail, with over 700 staff and detainees infected, Norris has taken on multiple roles, including that of a superhero for the families of detainees, a therapist, and a source of support for older mothers. She reflects on the unforeseen aspects of her role, stating, "I've become things that I didn't know I was going to have to become when I signed up for this job because of the pandemic."

Many of Norris's clients, as well as the numerous others released on bond, are now subject to electronic monitoring, and their legal journeys are far from over. Once the pandemic subsides and court proceedings resume, they will face judges, and if convicted, most will likely be looking at prison sentences.

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