



NEWS

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Contact:

Lorie Slass, Communications Director 610-278-3061 lslass@montcopa.org
Kaitlyn Foti, Press Secretary 610-278-3062 kfoti@montcopa.org

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Montgomery County Public Defender Recognizes First Herbert Morris Making the Difference Award Winner

Norristown, PA (March 17, 2017) – As part of Public Defense Week, the Montgomery County Public Defender’s Office presented the first annual Herbert Morris Making the Difference Award to the late J.B. Brooks at a ceremony today. Mr. Brooks, a forensic peer advocate who worked with agencies throughout the county, worked closely with the Public Defender’s Office, Adult Probation and Parole, Corrections staff and the county’s Justice Related Services team. Forensic peer advocates work with individuals in the legal system who have mental health issues.

“J.B. gave tirelessly to help those who were in the criminal justice system understand their rights, responsibilities, and help divert those who needed mental health services from incarceration to treatment,” said Chief Montgomery County Public Defender, Dean Beer.

Prior to his death in May of 2016, Brooks worked as a forensic peer advocate at Community Advocates, the advocacy team at HopeWorx Inc. based in Norristown. Brooks was an integral part of the team that developed the justice and recovery re-entry class, “It’s T.I.M.E.” with forensic psychologist Dr. Gail Vant Zelfde. He facilitated the peer-to-peer 14-week class for men with mental health and substance use issues who were incarcerated at the Montgomery County Correctional Facility in Eagleville. The class encourages individuals to identify problems in their thinking and behavior, provide tools to make changes and develop re-entry plans for living in the community after incarceration.

Brooks had just finished teaching the 16th session of the class with 17 graduates before he died. He was passionate about his job and dedicated to the people he served and worked to better himself and the delivery of advocacy services and peer support he provided.

The Montgomery County Commissioners also issued a proclamation on Thursday declaring this week Public Defense Week.

“We are proud to recognize the hard-working Montgomery County public defenders, paralegals and staff as part of Public Defense Week,” said Dr. Valerie A. Arkoosh, Chair, Montgomery County Board of Commissioners. “A strong and vigorous defense is fundamental to our criminal justice system and these hard-working professionals ensure that every resident, regardless of their ability to pay, have the representation they are entitled to under the Constitution.”

About the Montgomery County Public Defender’s Office - The Montgomery County Public Defender’s Office is dedicated to protecting the Constitutional rights of indigent individuals accused of violating the law. The Montgomery County Public Defender Office is developing programs in an effort to provide a holistic approach to the extra-legal concerns of their clients. Their goal is to improve overall outcomes for our clients in order to ameliorate the conditions that lead to involvement in the justice system and ultimately to reduce recidivism.

Since 2012, the Public Defender Office has added a social work division, developed a prison liaison program, expanded the investigations division, created a dedicated homicide division, added a mitigation specialist and policy director and increased juvenile advocacy and adult system staff.

About the Herbert Morris Making the Difference Award- The Herbert Morris Making the Difference Award recognizes individuals or community organizations working to improve the lives of those who are impacted by the criminal justice system or whose mission is to address the systemic issues plaguing the criminal justice system. The late Herbert Morris worked with Community Action Development Commission (CADCOM) in Norristown and was instrumental in designing and leading many community initiatives. He also served as the director of the Fatherhood Empowerment Center at CADCOM.