

**Jon Wainwright:** Hello, and welcome to In Practice. I'm Jon Wainwright and on today's Policy Change edition of In Practice, we'll be talking with Sosan Madanat about shifting cultural norms and educating folks as a way to change public policy in the long run. Sosan is the Executive Director at the Foundation for Democracy and Justice in Sacramento, California. Sosan, thanks for joining us today.

**Sosan Madanat:** Thanks for having me. I'm happy to be here.

**JW:** Alright. So, let's just go ahead and dive right in. If you could let us know when the Foundation started, and what was the spark that gave birth to it.

**SM:** Ok, sure. The Foundation itself was incorporated in 2013, a few years before I actually joined the organization. I joined in 2015, and it was just an organization that existed because a group of leaders in the community - business leaders, educators, law professionals - really found that there was a need for increased civic education throughout California. And so, the organization was inspired by the Chief Justice of California, and her desire to really increase civic education in schools and also for adults.

**JW:** So I know that you guys, it's on your website, you say that you're really focused on educating folks about, not just the three branches generally, but specifically on the importance of a strong and independent judiciary and also an adequately funded judiciary.

**SM:** Right.

**JW:** So, I want to try to break those down a little bit. I want to start with what a strong and independent judiciary is.

**SM:** Ok, that's a really good question. A lot of the time, the third branch, the judicial branch, is the one that most people come into contact with more frequently than the other two. And it seems to be that most people don't understand what the function of the judicial branch is. And it's really important to us to identify and to educate people, that a strong and independent judicial branch is one that exists in tandem with the other two, but importantly, exists on its own to interpret the laws that have been passed by the legislative and executive branch and apply them to the cases at hand without any impact or fear of public opinion changing the way the way that those laws are applied. So that's really what is important to us in emphasizing to the public.

**JW:** And I guess, you could also say, also, without the fear of being influenced by the legislative or executive branches too.

**SM:** Right, exactly, exactly.

**JW:** And when you say adequately funded, what are we getting at there? I realize that CA's been through a history of budget cuts in our recent past. What's led to the need to put more money into the court system?

**SM:** So, interestingly enough, this issue was brought to my attention when I was an intern as a law student, interning in Senator Noreen Evans' office. She was the chair of the Judiciary Committee at the time, and I was put on doing research for judicial issues, as a

law student. And, a lot of judges were coming in to her office discussing the need to be funded as they were pre-recession. And the issues that they were telling us about were just heartbreaking. People were not able to apply for and file temporary restraining orders in domestic violence cases, courthouses were closing and causing a lot of access to justice issues, especially for those that are the most vulnerable in the community. And so, really, one of the things that we are hoping to do by educating the general public we would hope to create more support for the judicial branch and hope that others can see how important it is, and how funding can increase access to justice.

**JW:** Okay, so how do you go about educating the public on these issues?

**SM:** So, it's done in a variety of ways. We're still a fairly new organization with a staff of one and half, and so bandwidth is fairly, you know, limited. But a few of the things we've done in the past is we've hosted speaking engagements at public libraries where we've brought in a judge and usually an attorney in tandem to do a presentation to the general public about civics, about the structure of the state court and federal court system, to provide them with a better understanding of how it functions. We've recently, actually, held a program at the International Rescue Committee, that was in Mid-August, and we had Judge Myers come and speak to a few of the constituents in that center about family law - they had requested and said that there was a need for family law education. So we've done that. And we've hosted a few panels in the past, and just yesterday, actually, we had a resource fair at Sac State. So we partnered with their Community Engagement Center to provide various resources to students and the community.

**JW:** Very cool. So you guys are a non-profit organization, focused on education, and I realize just, as a non-profit, you're limited in how you're able to change policy. It seems like the way you go about changing things is more based on educating the public than say, direct lobbying like your local chamber of commerce could do.

**SM:** Right

**JW:** So how have you found that to be an effective way to change policies?

**SM:** So it's challenging when you go at it from a different angle, but we have found that by educating the general public, that they then feel more empowered to go out into their communities and be an ambassador or a liaison, for the groups that they run into. Or, they feel more empowered to contact their local leaders and express their opinions and their beliefs as to what's important, for example, court funding or better access to the courts and understanding that. And so, it does make it a little more challenging when you go at it from that perspective, but it's been really interesting to see people find that power in themselves, and to be more engaged in the community.

**JW:** So, in a way, it's kind of like you're helping people find their own voice in the political and government systems.

**SM:** Yeah! I wouldn't've thought about it that way, but yeah.

**JW:** Yeah.

**SM:** Thank you.

**JW:** And you've mentioned a couple of times that it's challenging. What are some of the challenges you have to face?

**SM:** Well, sometimes in programs we've had in the past, people see that a judge or an attorney is speaking, or a law professor, and they automatically think that they're there to help solve a legal problem. We don't actually provide legal services to individuals. So, that has been challenging, because sometimes they don't always understand the structure of the program. But what we do try to do in situations like that is direct them to places that can provide them with those direct legal services and give them information about other organizations in the community that do that. So that has been one example of a challenge, is really trying to structure and frame what we do so that it's more approachable and understandable.

**JW:** Well, great. And do you have anything else where you've got chances for people to get involved or just, other opportunities where you're doing outreach to help educate the public on these issues?

**SM:** So we're always looking for people to volunteer. Specifically, right now, what we're working on right now is building our Speakers Bureau. So if there are new judges or attorneys in the community that are interested in helping us provide presentations that would be amazing. We always need people with expertise in different areas that are willing to come and speak to different community groups. And then also, if there are groups in the community, organizations, other non-profits that are looking for guest speakers, we are more than happy to provide that. We really see ourselves as the facilitators to providing a robust conversation and dialogue amongst legal professionals and leaders and the community themselves.

**JW:** Great. And for these groups, if they're interested and want to reach out to you, and find ways to get involved, where can they find you?

**SM:** Thank you for asking. So we have Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter. Our Facebook is FDJ California. You can find us on there. Our Twitter handle is @FDJ\_CA. And our Instagram is FDJCA. So, people can follow us along on there. We post a lot on our FB about upcoming events and give information. Our website also has a lot of information on there, and resources - [www.fdjca.org](http://www.fdjca.org).

**JW:** Alright. Well, fantastic. I'll be sure to give all of those a like and a follow. We hope all our listeners do too.

**SM:** Great, thank you.

**JW:** And, we'll link off to your website, your social media feeds on our post. Speaking of websites and posts, you can find us online at [capimpactca.com](http://capimpactca.com). And we're also on Twitter @CAPImpactCA. In Practice is a production of the Capital Center for Law & Policy at McGeorge School of Law and Focused Decisions. For more information on the Capital

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