



Expanded Public Defense Services Grant: Resources on Holistic Defense

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Overview

Holistic defense is a client-centered approach to public defense that addresses client needs beyond their immediate criminal case, including drivers into the criminal legal system and collateral consequences of legal system involvement. It generally relies on multi-disciplinary teams, meaning defense attorneys work closely with social workers, housing navigators, immigration attorneys, or other specialists to identify and meet client needs.

Holistic defense programs benefit entire communities by connecting clients to supportive services that address the root causes of system involvement. Research demonstrates the strong public safety benefits of such an approach.¹ Multiple studies document that steady income, stable housing, and access to services drastically reduce crime and make our communities safer.²

¹ Corey R. Lepage. Measuring Effectiveness of Holistic Defense: Social Service Provision and Justice System Outcomes. *Criminology, Criminal Justice, Law & Society*. Volume 24, Issue 1: 38-51. 2023, found [here](#); Anderson, Buenaventura and Heaton. The Effects of Holistic Defense on Criminal Justice Outcomes. *Harvard Law Review*. Volume 132, Number 3. January 2019, found [here](#).

² Fontaine, Gilchrist-Scott, Roman, Taxy and Roman. Supportive Housing for Returning Prisoners: Outcomes and Impacts of the Returning Home-Ohio Pilot Project. Urban Institute, Justice Policy Center. August 2012, found [here](#); Heller, Shah, Guryan, Ludwig, Mullainathan and Pollack. Thinking,

This resource document provides information on some established holistic defense practices and relevant research. It is not a roadmap for applications, nor an endorsement of any particular model, but instead a starting point to spark ideas for counties unfamiliar with holistic defense.

OSPD acknowledges that there are many robust holistic defense models within California; this resource list intentionally highlights out-of-state models to avoid any conflict of interest with potential grant applicants.

Integrating Social Workers into Defense Teams

Embedding social workers in public defense offices can have multiple benefits, including reducing attorney workload, improving client outcomes, and reducing rates of incarceration and sentence lengths.³ By linking clients to vital services and support, social workers play a critical role in delivering stronger legal defense. Their presence not only improves outcomes for clients, but also fosters trust and collaboration between public defenders, the courts, and the broader community.⁴ Social workers bring valuable expertise in identifying and connecting clients to relevant support services—an especially powerful tool in rural areas where options are limited and rarely publicized.⁵

The Bronx Defenders – Social Work Practice

The Bronx Defenders in New York have been leaders in holistic defense, utilizing a [social work practice](#) completely integrated into defense teams. Social workers partner with attorneys to craft defense strategies tailored to each client’s unique needs and strengths. Attorney-social worker teams engage together directly with clients and families, coauthor mitigation and sentencing memos, and advocate in court. Beyond the courtroom, social workers build strong ties with community organizations, using those relationships to connect clients with vital services and address the root causes of legal system involvement.

Fast and Slow? Some Field Experiments to Reduce Crime and Dropout in Chicago. The Quarterly Journal of Economics. Volume 132, Issue 1. February 2017, found [here](#); Allan Jay. How Income Inequality Affects Crime Rates. Finances Online. June 16, 2022, found [here](#).

³ Matej, Hussemann and Siegel. Assessing a Social Worker Model of Public Defense. Urban Institute. 2021, found [here](#).

⁴ Turner and Sharpe. Supporting and Evaluating Implementation of a Holistic Defense Model in North Carolina. Criminal Justice Innovation Lab. 2025, found [here](#).

⁵ Ibid.

Colorado State Public Defender - Forensic Social Workers

Colorado incorporates [social workers](#) into public defender teams across the state to investigate clients' life histories, conduct mitigation advocacy, and develop sentencing plans to improve client outcomes beyond resolution of their immediate case.

Michigan Indigent Defense Commission - Social Worker Defender Project

In 2018, the Michigan Indigent Defense Commission piloted the [Social Worker Defender Project](#) in Genesee County. The program connects indigent defense attorneys from an assigned counsel list with social workers in low-level felony cases. The social workers work with clients to develop alternative sentencing plans, which allowing the defense team to provide a comprehensive picture of their clients, including background information and recommendations for treatment and services, to ensure success in the community.

The Social Worker Defender Project also included the development of a [program manual](#), which provides information on how to utilize social workers for public defense and outlines the steps to replicate the program in other jurisdictions.

Early Representation Units

The first appearance in a criminal case, especially when a person is in custody, can have lasting consequences on a person's life. Judges must make quick decisions whether to keep a person in custody based on whatever information they have immediately in front of them. If a person is kept in custody, they may lose their job, their housing, and access to their children. When a public defender's office has attorneys or advocates who are able to talk to individuals before the initial court hearing, document community ties, and verify employment and family support, judges make better-informed detention decisions. Early representation teams can gather and present essential information as to who has children, health concerns, or pressing employment issues—all factors that can mean the difference between staying in custody or being released and able to advocate for a more just outcome.⁶ Research has also demonstrated that early representation reduces racial disparity in pretrial detention and increases public safety.⁷

⁶ The Constitution Project National Right to Counsel Committee. Don't I Need a Lawyer? Pretrial Justice and the Right to Counsel at First Judicial Bail Hearing. The Constitution Project, page 31, March 2015, found [here](#).

⁷ Paul Heaton. Enhanced Public Defense Improves Pretrial Outcomes and Reduces Racial Disparities. Indiana Law Journal. Volume. 96: 701. 2021, found [here](#).

Without early representation, indigent clients face longer pre-trial detention, which can result in loss of housing and income, harm to families and children, and a waste of county resources.⁸ Longer pretrial detention is also associated with higher conviction rates and longer sentences.⁹

Defender Association of Philadelphia - Bail Advocates and Early Bail Review Program

In 2017, Defender Association of Philadelphia implemented a [pilot program](#) that used bail advocates to interview clients shortly after arrest and gather information that could be used to argue for pretrial release. A study of this program demonstrated that not only did the bail advocates reduce racial disparity in pretrial detention, but the bail advocates also increased public safety by reducing clients' likelihood of bail violations and future arrests.¹⁰

Currently, the Defender Association of Philadelphia uses a [team](#) of lawyers, social workers and support staff to design release plans, explore drug treatment and other supportive service referrals, and make informed arguments at early bail review hearings.

The Bronx Defenders - Early Defense Team

The Bronx Defenders has a multidisciplinary [Early Defense Team](#) that provides timely services to members of the community seeking legal assistance. These interdisciplinary teams meet with community members to provide early intervention, assistance navigating the legal system, and resource referrals. The Early Defense team staffs a 24-hour hotline and walk-in service during business hours. They are available to invoke rights, navigate CPS investigations, and provide legal counsel from the earliest moment a community member identifies that legal advice may be needed.

⁸ Worden, Shteynberg, Morgan, and Davies. The Impact of Counsel at First Appearance on Pretrial Release in Felony Arraignments: The Case of Rural Jurisdictions. Deason Criminal Justice Reform Center, Southern Methodist University, January 2020, found [here](#).

⁹ Brett Fischer et al. Providing Early Legal Counsel Reduces Jail Time and Improves Case Outcomes. California Policy Lab. June 2023, found [here](#). Megan Stevenson & Sandra G. Mayson. Pretrial Detention and Bail. Faculty Scholarship at Penn Carey Law, 2017.

¹⁰ Paul Heaton. Enhanced Public Defense Improves Pretrial Outcomes and Reduces Racial Disparities. Indiana Law Journal. Volume. 96: 701. 2021, found [here](#).

Mitigation Specialists

Mitigation specialists are members of the defense team that focus on sentencing advocacy to reduce incarceration and increase opportunities for successful re-entry.¹¹ Mitigation specialists conduct investigation, interview clients and family members, and retrieve educational and mental health records.¹² Mitigation specialists also collaborate with clients and develop release plans to facilitate successful re-entry.¹³ Mitigation specialists help defense teams create a full picture of a person at sentencing, which enables judges to make more informed decisions about sentencing options.¹⁴

Cook County Public Defender office - Mitigation Division

The Cook County Public Defender office in Illinois utilizes [mitigation specialists](#) to help attorneys advocate for better outcomes at sentencing. Mitigation specialists interview clients and families, review records, and create detailed social histories to help attorneys advocate for alternatives to incarceration.

Public Defender Service for D.C. - Office of Rehabilitation & Development

The Public Defender Service in Washington, D.C. has developed a unit called the [Office of Rehabilitation and Development](#) (ORD). ORD is staffed by licensed forensic social workers and licensed forensic professional counselors who are sentencing specialists. These staff provide psychosocial assessments, individualized treatment plans, and sentencing recommendations. ORD also publishes two annual guides with a list of services available to adults and children in the criminal and juvenile justice systems.

Hennepin County Public Defender's Office - Dispositional Advisors

The Hennepin County Public Defender's Office in Minneapolis, Minnesota, uses [dispositional advisors](#) as sentencing advocates. These advocates work in teams with defenders to interview clients and families and review records. They also prepare sentencing reports, create individualized treatment plans, and connect clients to treatment or community resources. For more information on measured outcomes of this program, including reduced sentence length, see [here](#).

¹¹ See Vartkessian, Posel, Ginez and Hubbard. When Justice Depends on It: The Need for Professional Standards for Mitigation Development in All Criminal Cases. Volume 52: 449. 2022, found [here](#).

¹² Id. at 477-481.

¹³ Id. at 468.

¹⁴ Id. at 485.

Family Defense

Half of incarcerated people are parents of minor children.¹⁵ Custody and parental rights can be permanently impacted by criminal cases, and incarcerated parents have little means of ensuring access to their children.¹⁶ Multiple studies demonstrate that family separation caused by parental incarceration negatively impacts a child's physical and mental health.¹⁷ Embedding parent-defense dependency lawyers within public defender offices can reduce family separation and ensure better outcomes across criminal and dependency proceedings.¹⁸ Criminal defense lawyers can work in tandem with the dependency lawyers to leverage information and services across cases. Likewise, embedded parent defense attorneys can access training, litigation preparation, and the resources of a public defender office to enhance representation in dependency proceedings.

Harris County Public Defender's Office - Division of Holistic Services

In 2020, the Harris County Public Defender's Office implemented a [Division of Holistic Services](#). In 2024, as a part of that initiative, in recognition of the difficulty that clients faced navigating CPS investigations while facing criminal charges, the PDO brought on a full-time attorney specializing in parent representation.

The Bronx Defenders, Neighborhood Defender Service, and Brooklyn Defender Service - Parent Defense

These three large public defenders in New York City all have [representation in-house](#) for parents facing family separation in dependency cases. All three offices function as the presumptive public defender for all parents in their areas charged with child abuse and neglect. They all have interdisciplinary attorney-social work models, an emphasis on early defense at the time of arrest, and integrated training for all public defenders, whether criminal or family. Parent defenders and their social work teams collaborate closely with their criminal public defender colleagues in concurrent cases, and leverage cross-practice expertise, investigation, and information to their clients' benefits.

¹⁵ Maruschak, Bronson, and Alper. Parents in prison and their minor children: Survey of prison inmates, 2016. Bureau of Justice Statistics. 2021, found [here](#).

¹⁶ See Child Welfare Practice with Families Affected by Parental Incarceration, Children's Bureau. January 2021, found [here](#).

¹⁷ Wakefield and Wildeman. How Parental Incarceration Harms Children and What to Do About It. National Council on Family Relations Policy Brief. Volume 3, Issue 1. 2018, found [here](#).

¹⁸ See Gerber, Pang, Ross, Guggenheim, Pecora and Miller. Effects of an interdisciplinary approach to parental representation in child welfare. Children and Youth Services Review 102: 42-55. 2019, found [here](#).

Immigration Specialists

Indigent defenders have a Sixth Amendment duty to inform non-citizen clients about the potential risks of deportation or other immigration consequences associated with a criminal conviction.¹⁹ In order to effectuate this duty, defenders must inquire into their client's immigration status and goals, conduct investigation, and research how criminal statutes interplay with complex immigration law.

Immigration attorneys embedded within public defender offices can work alongside defenders, contributing their highly specialized expertise to avoid or mitigate negative immigration consequences from an underlying criminal case.²⁰ In some holistic defense offices, immigration attorneys not only consult with defenders on how to resolve an open criminal case, these immigration attorneys also provide full immigration representation to clients in pending immigration proceedings.²¹ Given the complexities of immigration law and the overwhelming caseloads of indigent criminal defenders, utilizing immigration specialists in public defense models helps to ensure that defenders are meeting their constitutionally mandated obligation to give accurate, case-specific immigration advice to every non-citizen clients.²²

Cook County Public Defender's Office - Immigration Division

In 2020, the Cook County Public Defender's Office formed the [Immigration Division](#). The division's immigration attorneys work with public defenders to assess potential adverse immigration consequences and recommend alternative resolutions. Immigration attorneys from the division also represent indigent noncitizens, including current and former public defender clients, in removal cases before the immigration court.

Harris County Public Defender's Office - Immigration Specialists

The Harris County Public Defender's Office in Texas uses a [holistic defense model](#) that incorporates immigration specialists. Immigration specialists provide written resources for attorneys regarding immigration consequences of criminal convictions. They also help defense attorneys individually advise non-citizen clients about possible immigration consequences of pleas or convictions in their cases.

¹⁹ *Padilla v. Kentucky*, 559 U.S. 356, 360 (2010).

²⁰ See Andres Dae Keun Kwon. Defending Criminal(ized) "Aliens" After Padilla: Toward a More Holistic Public Immigration Defense in the Era of Crimmigration. *UCLA Law Review*, Volume 63: 1034. 2016, found [here](#).

²¹ *Ibid*.

²² *Id.* at 1075.

Regional Holistic Defense: *sharing resources across counties*

A regional public defender office is an institutional public defender office that provides indigent defense services to two or more counties.²³ For rural counties, a regional public defender office may provide a pathway to improve indigent defense representation via a regional holistic defense model. Counties can reduce costs by sharing holistic defense resources through a centralized, regional office that also provides the infrastructure necessary to recruit and retain holistic defense staff, such as social workers, mitigation specialists, and immigration attorneys.²⁴

Northeast Michigan Regional Defender Office - Regional Holistic Defense

In 2021, Michigan established the [Northeast Michigan Regional Defender Office](#), embracing a holistic defense model to improve the representation for indigent clients in three rural counties in Northern Michigan.

The office was established to improve the former system, which previously used appointed private attorneys without a centralized staffing or structure. Attorneys at the Northeast Michigan Regional Defender Office have [reported](#) increased collaboration and more evenly distributed caseloads. In 2022, the office furthered its holistic defense model by adding an in-house social worker to gather mitigation information, refer clients to services, and address root issues to reduce system involvement. Attorneys reported that the inclusion of a shared social worker has allowed attorneys to focus their time on the legal issues in their cases.

²³ California Government Code section 27700.

²⁴ Aiden Park. Alone in the Lone Star State: How a Lack of Centralized Public Defender Offices Fails Rural Indigent Defendants. University of Michigan Journal of Law Reform. Volume 56: 571, 594. 2023, found [here](#).

Additional Resources:

[Vera Institute of Justice](#): Interactive tool with county-by-county data on incarceration rates, racial/demographic statistics, and budget information. This tool also identifies what percentage of a county's jail population is pretrial (meaning, simply awaiting case resolution and not convicted of any offense) and what percentage of the jail population has mental health needs.

[Judicial Council Court Statistics Report](#): Annual report providing data on the number of superior court filings and case dispositions. Table 7a provides the number of annual felony and misdemeanor filings by California county.

[National Association of Public Defense Staffing Recommendations](#): Expert policy statement providing recommendations on the number of necessary investigators, social workers, and paralegals for a public defender system, based on an attorney-to-staff ratio.

[United States Census Bureau QuickFacts](#): The QuickFacts section of the United States Census Bureau's website provides general population data by county.