**Wednesday, June 25th**

**3:00-4:00pm Eastern: General Member Discussion on the Future of Public Defense Research**

* Venita Embry, [venita.embry@gmail.com](mailto:venita.embry@gmail.com), RTI International

In light of recent federal changes, we will be hosting a general member discussion to explore how we can continue advancing public defense research during this period of uncertainty. This session is intended to provide a collaborative space for reflection, dialogue, and idea generation as we navigate this new landscape together and work to sustain the progress and community we've built. We will encourage discussions on new approaches to shifting federal priorities, identifying new opportunities at the state and local levels, and continuing to elevate existing work and promising innovations.To help us further shape this session by sharing any questions, topics, or areas of concern you would like to see addressed. Send your suggestions to Venita Embry at [venita.embry@gmail.com](mailto:venita.embry@gmail.com).

**Thursday, June 26th**

**12:00-1:30pm Eastern: An Introduction And Data Walk Through the 2025 Census of Public Defender Office**

* Ryan Kling, Ryan.Kling@usdoj.gov, Bureau of Justice Statistics
* Andrew Davies, albdavies@smu.edu, Co-Principal Investigator
* Heather Hall, hhall.cpdo@gmail.com, Co-Principal Investigator
* Ryan Dratler, rsdratler@gmail.com, National Association for Public Defense
* Aaron Gottlieb, agottlieb@uchicago.edu, University of Chicago
* Justine Luongo, jmluongo@legal-aid.org, New York City Legal Aid Society
* Other defenders, TBD

In 2025, the Bureau of Justice Statistics is distributing the Census of Public Defender Offices to every public defender office in the United States. This research, undertaken through a cooperative agreement with the National Association of Public Defense, the Urban Institute, and the National Opinion Research Center, provides an essential update to the most recent Census, which now dates back almost twenty years. In this session, representatives from all partner organizations in the research team will discuss the project and take a ‘data walk’ through the Census instrument. Researchers and practitioners will be asked about the value that the data the Census will collect could represent for both researchers and the indigent defense community.

**1:40-3:10pm Eastern: Building and Leveraging State Data Systems**

**Statewide Tracking of Attorney Workloads in a Decentralized System**

* Jonah Siegel, siegelj2@michigan.gov, Michigan Indigent Defense Commission Research Director
* Neil Weinberg, weinbergn@michigan.gov, Michigan Indigent Defense Commission Research Analyst

This year, indigent defense systems in Michigan implemented attorney workload standards for the first time, after many years of research and preparation. With 120 local systems, no standardized case management software, and a range of case categories to track, administrators were struggling with accurate and proportionate counting. During this presentation, the Michigan Indigent Defense Commission will demo several Excel trackers created to assist local systems. The discussion will also cover some additional obstacles to compliance with workload standards. With roster attorneys still providing a considerable portion of representation across the state, tracking in real time the statewide total workload of attorneys who work in multiple systems poses many challenges. Come learn what Michigan has implemented thus far, and offer your insights and suggestions for best practices as we continue to improve the implementation of attorney workload standards.

**Unequal Scales: California's Investment Disparity Between Prosecution and Public Defense**

* Tatyana Kaplan, PhD, tatyana.kaplan@ospd.ca.gov, Research Data Specialist, Indigent Defense Improvement Division, California Office of the State Public Defender
* Caneel Fraser, caneel.fraser@ospd.ca.gov, Executive Director, Indigent Defense Improvement Division, California Office of the State Public Defender

Through a comprehensive analysis of available state and county budgets, grant documents, and stakeholder survey responses, IDID identified and catalogued state-administered funding available to either prosecution or public defense in California. The findings demonstrate significant state investment in local prosecution without corresponding investment in local public defense, contributing to longstanding disparities in funding. (Click here to access the report) The report’s researcher and lead author, Tatyana Kaplan, PhD, will discuss the methodology employed to undertake such a comprehensive funding analysis, as well as key takeaways relevant to public defense funding challenges across jurisdictions.

**3:20-4:50pm Eastern: Public Defender Offices: How to Make Them and the Difference They Make**

**Overcoming Barriers to Public Defense: A Change Theory Approach to Public Defender Office Adoption in Texas**

* Shelby Sirivore, shsirivore@smu.edu, Deason Criminal Justice Reform Center

In response to research demonstrating the benefits of public defender offices (PDOs) in improving case processing and outcomes, the Texas Indigent Defense Commission (TIDC) initiated funding programs to reduce financial barriers for counties seeking to establish local offices. However, despite the purported advantages of PDOs and the availability of state funding, many counties opt not to create them due to various challenges, including a perceived lack of need, the absence of a “local champion” advocating for their establishment, and difficulties in reaching consensus among decision-makers. Using interviews with 46 local stakeholders across 23 Texas counties—both those that opened PDOs and those that did not—this paper examines the obstacles to PDO adoption through a change theory framework, identifying the critical steps necessary for successful implementation and addressing the challenges counties may face in the process.

**A Synthetic Control Analysis of the Impact of Public Defender Office Creation in Texas on Misdemeanor Appointment Rates**

* Andrew Davies, albdavies@smu.edu, Deason Criminal Justice Reform Center

How can rural counties in the United States make sure that indigent criminal defendants are able to obtain appointed counsel? Prior research suggests appointed representation rates are higher in counties that use public defender offices, though no causal relationship - let alone a causal mechanism - has been established. Using a synthetic control approach, we examine rates of representation by appointed counsel before and after the creation of public defender offices in fifteen, mostly rural, Texas counties. We find evidence that appointed representation rates did increase significantly in some, though not all, of the counties. Reviewing interview data, we further find that increases were larger in jurisdictions where the new offices made efforts affirmatively to reach out to defendants in need of their help.

**Friday June 27th**

**12:20-1:50pm Eastern: Strengthening Public Defense Representation**

**Advancing Culturally Competent and Client-Centered Public Defense: Integrating Emotional Intelligence and Identity Development**

* Dr. Cherise Fanno Burdeen, eideiainstitute@gmail.com, Executive Director, EIDEIA Institute
* David Kelton Starks, eideiainstitute@gmail.com, Therapeutic Coach, EIDEIA Institute
* Alison Bloomquist, eideiainstitute@gmail.com, Board Member, EIDEIA Institute

This presentation explores the critical importance of emotional intelligence and racial identity work in advancing culturally competent and client-centered public defense. By integrating these elements, defenders can deepen their understanding of clients’ lived experiences, build stronger attorney-client relationships, and deliver more effective legal representation. The session will highlight the role of emotional intelligence in navigating complex interpersonal dynamics, mitigating bias, and fostering empathy. Additionally, we will explore racial identity development and its impact on clients and defenders, offering practical strategies to enhance advocacy by honoring cultural contexts and promoting equity. This holistic approach aims to equip public defenders with the tools to address systemic injustices while centering their clients' humanity.

Key topics will include:

* Emotional intelligence as a tool for better communication and client rapport.
* Understanding racial identity development and its influence on legal outcomes.
* Strategies for embedding cultural competence in defense practices.
* Practical steps to foster a client-centered approach that acknowledges systemic and individual biases.

Attendees will leave with actionable insights to enhance their practice, better serve diverse communities, and contribute to a more just and equitable legal system.

**Strengthening Parent Representation in Family Court – Early Data Insights from the New York State Office of Indigent Legal Services**

* Reilly Weinstein, LCSW - Family Court Senior Research Associate at the New York State Office of Indigent Legal Services

Between 2019 and 2024, the New York State Office of Indigent Legal Services (ILS) has awarded forty-one counties and New York City with funding to improve the quality of legal representation to parents accused of child abuse or neglect who cannot afford to hire an attorney. These initiatives aim to strengthen parent representation through timely access to counsel, interdisciplinary collaboration, reduced caseloads and enhanced training. To track implementation progress, ILS partnered with providers of parent representation across New York State to expand Family Court data collection capacity. This collaboration informed the development of the first ILS Family Court reporting instrument, the Parent Representation Report (PRR-195). On August 30th, 2024, ILS received its first round of PRR-195 submissions from over thirty grant recipients. Preliminary findings suggest a promising foundation for Family Court data collection and highlight both progress and barriers to reform. Notably, the data emphasize the critical role of interdisciplinary representation – particularly the inclusion of social workers and parent advocates – in addressing the poverty-related issues at the core of family regulation system-involvement.

**2:00-3:30pm Eastern: Social Work Innovations in Holistic Indigent Defense**

The integration of social workers on legal teams has the benefit of bringing a holistic lens to indigent defense, particularly in non-capital mitigation. The presence of social workers in public defender offices is becoming more common across the US, and this trend is also occurring in the private defender and civil legal settings. This panel will include 4 presentations on innovations led by social workers in the field. One presentation will be focused on the need for research and development of evidence-based models and standards for non-capital mitigation. We will then present three unique models of holistic indigent defense: one is a private criminal defender panel; another is an institutional holistic public defender office; and the last is a federally designated protection and advocacy agency that serves individuals with disabilities statewide.

**Closing the Loop: The Power of Storytelling and Non-Capital Mitigation**

* Lindsay Bendell, lbendell@communityjusticeservices.com, Washington University in St. Louis

As we move closer and closer to abolishing the death penalty, many public defender offices have adopted a new model of defense called the holistic defense model. Holistic defense recognizes that if we address a client’s needs beyond what is heard in a courtroom, defense teams have greater outcomes, while the client benefits in the long term from the support provided throughout the criminal process. As part of the holistic defense practice, non-capital mitigation has risen in popularity. Non-capital mitigation is essential because not only does it change lives, it saves lives. When it comes to the use of mitigation in negotiations and sentencing, it allows a person charged with a criminal case a reason for hope and change. When using mitigation to advocate for shorter sentences or reconsiderations, a person charged often sees the possibility of a second chance, and with the help of a good defense team, a plan and support to not squander that chance. The non-capital mitigation specialist works in tandem with the client to advocate for more just outcomes. Currently, there is no published empirical data regarding non-capital mitigation. As a social worker, one of our guiding principles is the person-in-environment perspective which highlights the importance of understanding an individual and individual behavior in light of the environmental contexts in which that person lives and acts. Social workers are often a natural fit for this role because our background and training aligns us with what drives quality mitigation. Social workers can spearhead research and development of evidence-based models and standards for non-capital mitigation. It is time to reframe only using mitigation on our most complex cases and start embracing it as a way to practice more client-centered criminal defense. Non-capital mitigation specialists have a range of skills and solutions that can be used to advocate for almost any criminal case successfully.

**How to Utilize Social Workers in Managed Assigned Counsel Indigent Defense Offices**

* Harpreet Samra, harpreets@smcba.org, San Mateo County Bar Association

Indigent criminal defense in San Mateo County is based on a managed assigned counsel platform. The Private Defender Program (PDP), which wanted to find a way to be a holistic defense model type of office, decided to bring Social Workers on board in August 2021. The Supervising Social Worker built and structured the program so that independent contract social workers provide defense teams a mental health perspective to their cases that was not there before. A large portion of clients that come through the PDP each are now assigned an attorney, investigator and Social Worker to their team to help build out and work their cases. This portion of the presentation will consist of how to bring independent contract Social Workers on board to a team, regardless of the type of indigent defense office it is, and how they may work their criminal cases.

**Toward Holistic Defense: Building and Managing a Culture of Holistic Collaboration**

* Caitlin Becker, caitlinb@bronxdefenders.org, Bronx Defenders

While holistic defense emerged in the 1990s as a promising innovation in non-capital indigent defense, the approach has gained popularity in recent years. A 2019 study by a research team from RAND and Penn Law found that over a ten-year period, holistic representation in the Bronx prevented more than 1.1 million days of incarceration and saved taxpayers an estimated $160 million in incarceration costs alone. This study has helped propel jurisdictions around the country to adopt holistic practices. In 2022, the Santa Cruz County Office of the Public Defender (PDO) was one such jurisdiction. On July 1 2022, PDO opened its doors as a new county public defender agency with a model of community-based whole-person defense, committed to building interdisciplinary legal teams around individuals facing criminal charges. The model also invites defenders to engage with the community in a meaningful way, responsive to community needs. This portion of the presentation will focus on the transition from a private firm model of public defender lawyering to a holistic model of representation in a county agency. We will review lessons learned from this transition to support jurisdictions moving towards holistic defense.

**Holistic Indigent Defense in Criminal and Civil Legal Settings: Creating a Pipeline of Social Work Opportunities Beyond Private Practice Therapy**

* Kathy Ho, kathy.ho@disabilityrightsca.org, Disability Rights California

Holistic indigent defense should not be limited to the criminal legal system and is highly relevant to civil legal settings. Legal aid offices nationwide have social workers as part of their legal teams to address their clients’ needs more holistically, recognizing that their clients' lives are more complex than the limited scope of their presenting legal issue. Disability Rights California is the federally designated protection and advocacy agency (P&A) for California and has been the first among the P&As to incorporate social workers and social work interns into their legal services model. Additionally, models of holistic indigent defense in legal settings are training opportunities for social work graduate students to learn more about potential career pathways as forensic social workers and mitigation specialists, rather than limiting their professional outlook to private practice therapy. These social work internships can serve an integral role in creating a pipeline of trained social workers to effectively collaborate in legal settings."