

The Holistic Defense Project

The Hinds County Public Defender's Office

Jackson, Mississippi

October 23, 2025

The Mississippi State Public Defender's Office

Fall 2025 Conference

The Problem — Where We Are Now



In 2018, 6AC published a report, *The Right to Counsel in Mississippi*, which exposed how, as a result of systemic failures in the state’s criminal system, many poor people charged with felonies fall into a “dead zone”: a months-long (and sometimes years-long) period during which indigent defendants languish in jail without ever speaking to a lawyer.

The Hinds County office has successfully shielded its clients from the “dead zone,” but the problem remains widespread across Mississippi. Even still, the pretrial stage exposes the broader flaws of the system. When a felony lawyer is appointed, the attorney is often too under-resourced, overworked, and financially conflicted to provide the kind of advocacy that extends beyond the courtroom — helping clients address the personal, social, and economic challenges that often drive system involvement in the first place.

Source: Sixth Amendment Center. (2023, January 4). Mississippi’s “dead zone” highlights the urgent need for state-level reforms. Sixth Amendment Center. Retrieved from <https://6ac.org/mississippi-dead-zone-highlights-the-urgent-need-for-state-level-reforms/>

The Intervention — What is “Holistic Defense?”

Traditional Indigent Defense Model



Holistic Defense Model



A new model of holistic public defense seeks to resolve cases more effectively and reduce recidivism by also addressing underlying challenges and needs that may lead to criminal activity. The model provides an interdisciplinary service that includes a criminal defense lawyer and advocates, such as social workers, housing advocates, investigators, and civil attorneys.

The Impact— Why This Model

Matters

Over a ten-year study period, holistic representation in the Bronx prevented more than 1 million days of incarceration.

- 1 Holistic defense reduces the likelihood of a custodial sentence by 16% and expected sentence length by 24%, without increasing future crime.
- 2 Holistic defense reduced the likelihood of a prison sentence by 16 percent — and actual prison-sentence length by 24 percent.
- 3 Holistic representation of clients saved taxpayers an estimated \$160 million in inmate housing costs alone.
- 4 Despite higher pre- and post-trial release rates, ten years after case resolution, defendants who received holistic representation committed no more crime than those who were incarcerated for longer periods.
- 5 Holistic defense can significantly reduce incarceration and save taxpayer dollars — without harming public safety.

KEY TAKEAWAYS

Holistic defense reduces the **likelihood of a custodial sentence** by **16%** and **expected sentence length** by **24%**, **without increasing future crime.**



Over study period, holistic defense averted **1.1 million** days of custodial punishment

3,200 fewer people incarcerated each year if all NYC defendants had comparable holistic defense

IS THIS A BIG DEAL?

Taxpayer savings
\$160 million

VS.

Holistic defender costs
\$95 million

The Beginning — Bringing Holistic Defense to Mississippi

Who is *Partners for Justice* (PFJ)

- Partners for Justice is a national nonprofit organization launched in 2018 to transform public defense through client-centered advocacy.
- The organization embeds and trains non-attorney Client Advocates to provide wraparound support, help clients navigate their cases, and strengthen public defenders' legal representation.
- Since their founding, PFJ:
 - has helped clients avoid an estimated 5,000 years of incarceration, resulting in significant taxpayer savings.
 - supports more than 15,000 people in accessing services, telling their stories, and returning home from incarceration.
 - currently operates in over 20 jurisdictions across the country.

PFJ at Hinds County

- In 2024, Hinds County launched its first Social Services Team within the Public Defender's Office, staffed by two PFJ Client Advocates and a Doctorate-level Social Worker — the first roles of their kind in Mississippi public defense.
- PFJ Advocates work alongside attorneys to address clients' non-legal needs, improving outcomes both inside and outside the courtroom.
- Clients receive support in areas like:
 - Housing and benefits navigation
 - Mental health and substance use coordination
 - Crisis stabilization and community referrals
 - Reentry planning and long-term stability



The Faces — Meet the Social Services Division



SHANAI
WATSON

Client Advocate



HANNAH
WILLIAMS

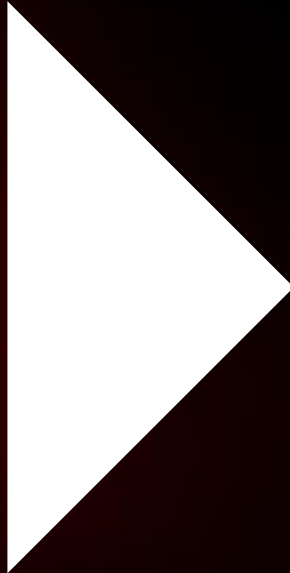
Client Advocate



DR. MARSTONYA
BUTLER-HENSON

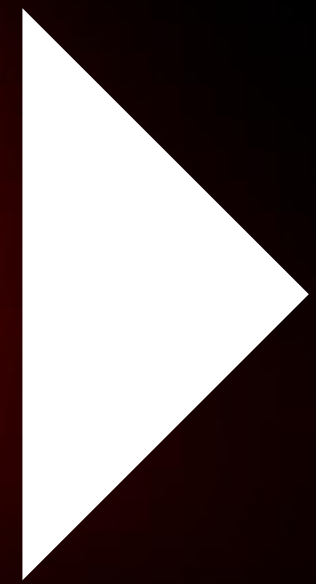
Social Worker

Beyond the Slides — Perspectives from the Panel



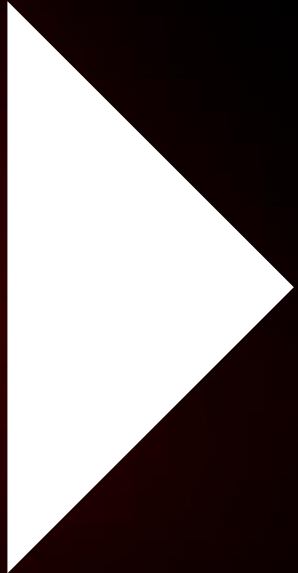
Perspectives from the Panel: Social Worker

Dr. Marstonya Butler-Henson



Perspectives from the Panel: Non-Indicted Client Division

Attorney Alice Stamps



Perspectives from the Panel: Indicted Client Division

Attorney Andrew Williams

The Conversation Continues — Open Mic + Discussion

The End (for now)

The real work begins after this slide.

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Client Advocate – Hannah Williams

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2025 Fall OSPD & MPDA Public Defender Conference

Session Six:
The Holistic Defense Project

Thursday, October 23, 2025
10:50- 11:50 a.m.

Marstonya Butler, Andrew
Williams, Alice Stamps, Hannah
Williams, & Shanai Watson

