

Supporting & Evaluating Implementation of Holistic Public Defense

In a new project launched in 2024, the [UNC School of Government Criminal Justice Innovation Lab](#) (the Lab) is supporting stakeholder interest in using social workers as part of a holistic public defense team. The project has two components. First, we will provide a workshop for Chief Public Defenders and their staff on using social workers as part of a holistic model. Second, we will evaluate the implementation of social workers in North Carolina public defender offices. The project is a partnership between the Lab and the North Carolina [Office of Indigent Defense Services](#) (IDS).

Responding to Stakeholder Interest in Holistic Public Defense

In 2023, the North Carolina General Assembly funded a significant expansion of North Carolina's public defender offices. As the system grows, IDS is promoting best practices, including holistic defense practices through the expanded use of social workers in public defender offices. In a traditional defense model, the central focus is resolving the client's criminal case. In contrast, a holistic defense model is a client-centered, interdisciplinary approach that provides both comprehensive legal representation and other services to address the causes and consequences of clients' involvement with the criminal justice system. These services can help address issues such as a lack of housing, mental health or substance use, and loss of a driver's license. However, there is currently no clear guidance about how to integrate social workers into the defense team. This project will address that information gap.

Workshop



In April 2024, the Lab and IDS will host a workshop for North Carolina Chief Public Defenders and select staff. Sessions will address, among other topics, the benefits and challenges of integrating social workers into the defense team; practical details like hiring social workers and processes for referrals; and potential implementation issues such as culture change. Expert panelists will share their experiences as part of a holistic defense team and give insight into the implementation process.

Implementation Study



The Lab also will conduct an implementation study of state defender offices that use social workers. This work will culminate in a report and educational sessions, sharing lessons learned about best practices and providing details on policies, procedures, costs, and common benefits and challenges. The implementation study also will lay the foundation for an empirical evaluation of this holistic defense model. It is projected to conclude in July 2025.

For more information, contact [Hannah Turner](#), Lab Project Manager.