

Can a ‘Teach for America’ Model Save Public Defense?

Public defenders are overworked and underpaid. A growing corps of client advocates is helping defendants in communities across the U.S.



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Sept. 12, 2026

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Before Peter Brown began working in public defense, he was a 22-year-old who could have used defending.

Mr. Brown was living in Florida, working his way through community college when he was arrested for a crime that he hadn’t committed. He had never been in legal trouble before. Now, he was spending the day in jail, where the presumption of his innocence suddenly felt like a myth.

Fingerprinting confirmed that it was a case of mistaken identity. But that brief taste of being trapped inside the legal system left its imprint on Mr. Brown. “Something that stuck with me was the powerlessness I felt in that situation,” Mr. Brown said.

He went on to attend Columbia University with hopes of pursuing a career in law. Then, one day in 2024, he spotted a job opening with a nonprofit called Partners for Justice that offered a way to test the waters.



Peter Brown was drawn to public defense work after spending a day in jail for a crime he did not commit. Rachel Wisniewski for The New York Times

Founded in 2018, Partners for Justice functions something like Teach for America, only for public defense. It recruits and trains talent, often recent college graduates, to be “client advocates,” and places them inside public defenders’ offices for two-year terms. Advocates work alongside attorneys to navigate clients’ nonlegal needs, from housing and drug treatment to employment and mental health services.

Their goal is twofold: to help clients avoid incarceration and stabilize their lives, and help reduce the burden on the nation's "grossly overworked" and underfunded public defenders.

In addition to handling most of the country's criminal cases, public defenders are also often responsible for addressing clients' other hardships; evictions, addiction, child care. Some offices employ social workers, but even they are often stretched thin, assisting clients with the most severe needs. Client advocates handle more ordinary, but still urgent crises: finding shelter beds, securing transport to and from court, clearing criminal records and writing humanizing "mitigation reports" about clients for judges to consider.

Partners for Justice is a new spin on an old model called "holistic defense," pioneered in the 1990s by the nonprofit, Bronx Defenders. Public defenders there work with immigration attorneys, family attorneys, social workers and other in-house experts to "put clients' lives, not just their cases, first," as co-founder Robin Steinberg once wrote.

The first large-scale study of this approach concluded that it reduced incarceration rates and time served, preventing people from spending nearly 1.1 million days in custody over the course of a decade, without compromising public safety. This model soon took off in some well-funded jurisdictions, but for many others remained out of reach.

Partners for Justice was started by a former Bronx Defenders attorney, Emily Galvin-Almanza, and her lifelong friend, Rebecca Solow, in hopes of addressing that disparity. Rather than requiring individual offices to hire a fleet of specialists, theirs is a stripped down version of a holistic defense that relies on young, comparatively inexperienced generalists. The founders call it "collaborative defense," but it shares the same goals.



Delaware County's public defender handles some 8,000 criminal cases a year. Rachel Wisniewski for The New York Times

“As defenders, we are being asked every single day by the system to come up with answers in fields that are not our field,” Ms. Galvin-Almanza said. The advocates provide the support lawyers need “to answer those questions well,” she said.

Today, Partners for Justice works with 44 public defender agencies across 23 states. Yet even as it expands, these programs, which are paid for primarily with state and local funding, are increasingly under threat amid budget shortfalls and federal cuts. That has left the attorneys and clients who rely on these advocates with one more cause to defend.

One sunny morning a few months ago, Mr. Brown and his fellow advocates gathered for their weekly meeting at the Delaware County Public Defender’s office, just outside Philadelphia. There was a box of sour gummies on the meeting table, a

box of Narcan on the bookshelf and a load of client updates to share. One advocate had recently scouted a recovery house for mothers and their children and was reporting back on its availability for newcomers. Another was trying to track down a client in a byzantine local health care system. Mr. Brown was headed to veteran's court to update the judge on his clients' progress, including one Marine Corps veteran named Matthew.

When Mr. Brown met Matthew months earlier, he had been facing up to three years in prison, following a string of burglary and trespassing convictions and probation violations. Matthew's public defender had introduced him to Mr. Brown in a last-ditch effort to convince the judge that what Matthew really needed was not time in prison, but treatment for his addiction and lingering trauma. Mr. Brown spent hours meeting with Matthew in jail, listening as he explained how his life had unraveled after he returned from Iraq with a back injury and an addiction to painkillers.

But Mr. Brown had also learned how Matthew was beginning to rebuild his life. Apart from probation violations, he hadn't committed any new crimes. He was working in construction and had begun to reunite with the family who had long ago cut him off. Mr. Brown wove this story into a mitigation report that portrayed Matthew as a veteran who had fought to protect the country, and now needed help dealing with his battle scars. The argument proved persuasive, and Matthew was released to inpatient substance use and post-traumatic stress disorder treatment. Mr. Brown was eager to report back on Matthew's success.

Before the advocates arrived, much of this work had fallen on staff attorneys, if it got done at all. In Delaware County, the public defender handles some 8,000 criminal cases a year. "I constantly felt like I was letting my clients down," said Taylor Dunn, who is now chief public defender.

In 2022, the first cohort of advocates joined his team. Today, they handle as many as 40 cases at a time, freeing the office's social workers to concentrate on the most challenging situations. That's made a critical difference, particularly to clients navigating court-ordered programs that divert people from fines and jail time,

which can involve months- or yearslong court-imposed requirements. In one such program, completion rates in Delaware County grew from 50 to 80 percent within two years of the advocates' arrival.



Melissa Simon Rachel Wisniewski for The New York Times

This kind of result is not unique to Delaware County. Three New Jersey pilot counties working with Partners for Justice have seen the number of clients being referred to public services like housing and mental health treatment increase fivefold, said Jennifer Sellitti, public defender for the state of New Jersey. And, in the first quarter of 2026, 95 percent of those referrals led clients to follow through with outlets offering support. That helps clients, she said, but it also lets lawyers “spend more time lawyering.” New Jersey is now considering expanding the program statewide.

Delaware County has become an early test case for whether this lower-lift riff on holistic defense can still improve client outcomes. One recent University of Pennsylvania analysis found that client advocates in the county had increased the number of cases that were dismissed or resulted in diversion by nearly 50 percent. Paul Heaton, the Penn professor who led the study, said these results suggest a “promising path to making the benefits of holistic defense available to many more communities and clients.”

Partners for Justice advocates have now worked with more than 34,000 people, clearing warrants for clients on Skid Row in Los Angeles and saving people decades in prison in western Colorado. Joanne Rizzuto faced up to 32 years in prison for distributing fentanyl, which resulted in her boyfriend’s death. But her advocate Ava Yurko’s mitigation report illustrated Ms. Rizzuto’s efforts to turn her life around, helping secure a sentence of probation. Today, Ms. Rizzuto, a mother of three, is working to become a specialist who assists people with their addiction recovery. She credits Ms. Yurko with giving her “a second chance at life.”



New client advocates Unzel Tariq, left, Wesley Russell and DeJanae Harges attend a training session at the Delaware County Public Defenders Office in Media, Pa. Rachel Wisniewski for The New York Times

Matthew, who asked to be identified by his first name to avoid jeopardizing future prospects, said the experience of working with Mr. Brown was a welcome departure from anything he'd experienced before. "It gave me someone to speak what I couldn't speak," he said.

Even some prosecutors see the value of aiding defendants in their efforts to prove their worth to courts. Helping people access treatment and get on their feet "is far more likely to yield long-term safety than simply putting that person in jail for a stretch," Tanner Rouse, Delaware County's new district attorney, said.

Still, Partners for Justice faces ongoing hurdles. At a time when some jurisdictions are returning to tough-on-crime policies, not every community is as eager to spend money keeping people out of prison. That's especially true amid federal cuts to safety net programs. In Multnomah County, Ore., last year, public defenders fought

back against proposed cuts to all six of the county's advocates, arguing that the program saved the county money on incarceration and ensured existing spending on social services would actually reach people. (Partners for Justice estimates governments save \$3 to \$6 for every \$1 they spend on advocates.) Multnomah County's funding was cut, but not eliminated, and this year, the county restored another \$75,000 in funding. But every year brings with it new negotiations.

Ms. Galvin-Almanza acknowledges that there are trade-offs local governments have to make. "If you get a major cut to a program that feeds kids or the elderly, you're going to prioritize getting food in bellies over augmenting your public defender," she said.

There are also those who argue that what limited funding exists should be spent on more permanent in-house advocacy, rather than a revolving cast of recent college graduates. Aside from Mr. Brown, who is continuing for a third year, most of the advocates who joined with him in 2024 are already gone.

That critique also makes sense to Ms. Galvin-Almanza. Ultimately, her goal is not to convince local governments to fund perpetual pilot programs, but to prove that holistic defense is worth their long-term investment. "In an ideal world," she said, "they don't need us anymore."



Melissa Simon and Peter Brown on their way to meet with clients in jail. Rachel Wisniewski for The New York Times

What project is changing your community?

What has been built, rebuilt or planned in your community that feels like progress to you? *

Tell us about a physical project — big or small — that has changed your neighborhood, city or region.

0 words

What stage is this project in?

☐ Getting started

☐ In progress

☐ Nearing completion

☐ Just completed

☐ Long completed

How successful has it been so far?

☐ Wildly successful

☐ Pretty successful

☐ Not yet clear

☐ A mixed bag

☐ Pretty unsuccessful

☐ Very unsuccessful

☐ Too early to tell

Why did you answer this way?

Tell us more about what you've seen or experienced.

0 words

What questions do you still have about this project or its impact?

Are there other projects — anywhere — that you have questions about?

This could be something you've noticed in another city, something you've read about or just something you're curious to understand better.

What is your name? *

What is your email address? *

Where do you live? *

Search places

What is your gender identity?

We are committed to making this project inclusive. This question asks for personal sensitive information that is protected by privacy laws. Answering is optional.

What is your race/ethnicity?

We are committed to making this project inclusive. This question asks for personal sensitive information that is protected by privacy laws. Answering is optional.

How old are you?

We can only accept submissions from people who are 14 years old, or older.

☐ 18 to 24

☐ 25 to 34

☐ 35 to 44

☐ 45 to 54

☐ 55 to 64

☐ 65 to 74

☐ 75 or above

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