



YEAR IN REVIEW

FY 2026

FY 2026 Year in Review

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About the New Jersey Office of the Public Defender

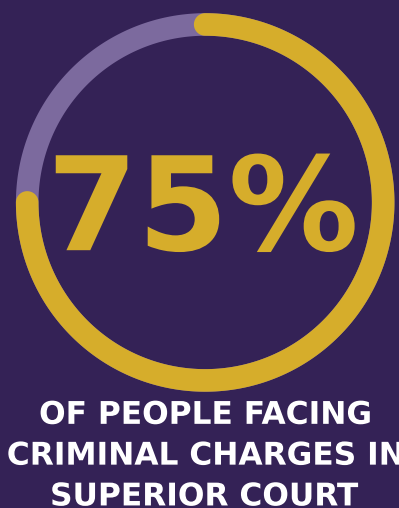
The New Jersey Office of the Public Defender (NJOPD) was established in 1967, after the U.S. Supreme Court affirmed in *Gideon v. Wainwright* that every person facing criminal charges has a constitutional right to legal representation, regardless of income.

Today, NJOPD provides statewide legal representation to people who cannot afford private counsel and are facing criminal charges in Superior Court. In addition, we represent parents accused of abuse and neglect in child welfare proceedings, children in child welfare proceedings, and people facing involuntary commitment. Our attorneys and staff serve clients across a wide range of legal matters and throughout the legal process.

We have continued to evolve in response to changing needs by adding specialized practice areas such as our Special Hearings, Forensic Science, Expungement, Parole Revocation and Resentencing, and Immigration Units. Most recently, the agency launched a statewide Youth Defense Unit to provide developmentally appropriate advocacy for young people.

The agency is also advancing a holistic approach to public defense, with a focus on the full range of client needs. NJOPD is also investing in responsible technology to strengthen its work while preserving the human connection at the heart of effective advocacy.

As we enter our 60th year of serving the people of New Jersey, our mission remains steadfast: to provide exceptional legal representation, safeguard due process, and stand as a bulwark against injustice.



~1,300
ATTORNEYS
AND STAFF



21
COUNTIES
ACROSS THE STATE



66
OFFICES
ACROSS THE STATE

Introduction From Public Defender Jennifer N. Sellitti



Jennifer N. Sellitti
New Jersey Public Defender

I am proud to share this Year in Review, a reflection of a year marked by innovation, impact, and a renewed vision for the future of public defense in New Jersey and beyond.

Throughout the past year, NJOPD demonstrated what is possible when public defense extends outside the courtroom and addresses the challenges that often bring people into contact with the legal system in the first place. When individuals are connected early to treatment, housing, employment services, and other stabilizing supports, they are better equipped to meet court obligations, rebuild their lives, and avoid future involvement with the legal system. This is not a theoretical approach or a long-term aspiration; it is a proven model that is already delivering meaningful results for individuals, families, communities, and taxpayers alike.

Public defenders have always understood that a person's legal case is only one part of a larger story. Effective advocacy requires understanding the circumstances that shape a client's life and addressing the barriers that stand in the way of stability and success. Attorneys cannot do this work alone. By integrating social workers, mitigation specialists, investigators, and other professionals into the defense team from the earliest stages of representation, NJOPD is advancing a holistic model that strengthens legal advocacy while ensuring clients receive critical support when it can make the greatest difference.

The results speak for themselves. Holistic representation connects people to services that already exist, provides courts with more complete and accurate information, reduces unnecessary incarceration, and improves outcomes across the board. It is fiscally responsible, evidence-based, and deeply rooted in the principle that public safety is strengthened when people have the tools and support necessary to succeed.

The accomplishments highlighted in these pages reflect the collective work of dedicated professionals across every corner of NJOPD. From trial and appellate advocacy to youth defense, immigration representation, mental health advocacy, child welfare, expungement, investigations, training, technology, administration, and specialized litigation, our work is interconnected and united by a common purpose. Together, we are building a public defense system that recognizes the dignity and potential of every person we represent and works to create pathways toward accountability, stability, and opportunity.

The future of public defense is not simply reacting to crises after they occur. It is identifying solutions before problems deepen, investing in people before they fall further behind, and creating lasting outcomes that benefit the entire state.

This is the future NJOPD is helping to build: a system that measures success not only by cases resolved, but by lives stabilized, families strengthened, and communities made safer. The work ahead is significant, but so is the opportunity. Together, we are proving that public defense can be both a guardian of constitutional rights and a catalyst for monumental change.



From Pilot to Statewide Model

Advancing Holistic Representation Across New Jersey

Building on the success of NJOPD's holistic representation pilot in Atlantic, Hudson, and Monmouth counties, legislation was introduced in both the Assembly and Senate to create one of the nation's first statewide holistic representation models established in law.

The pilot demonstrated that pairing public defenders with trained specialists can sharply increase clients' access to stabilizing services. By helping clients navigate existing programs and resources, the model makes fuller use of public investments and can help reduce repeated court involvement and incarceration.

PROPOSED STATEWIDE EXPANSION



A4897

Introduced in the Assembly



S4298

Introduced in the Senate

The legislation would establish a statewide holistic representation model across all 21 counties.

WHAT THE PILOT DELIVERED

142 → 773

Service Connections

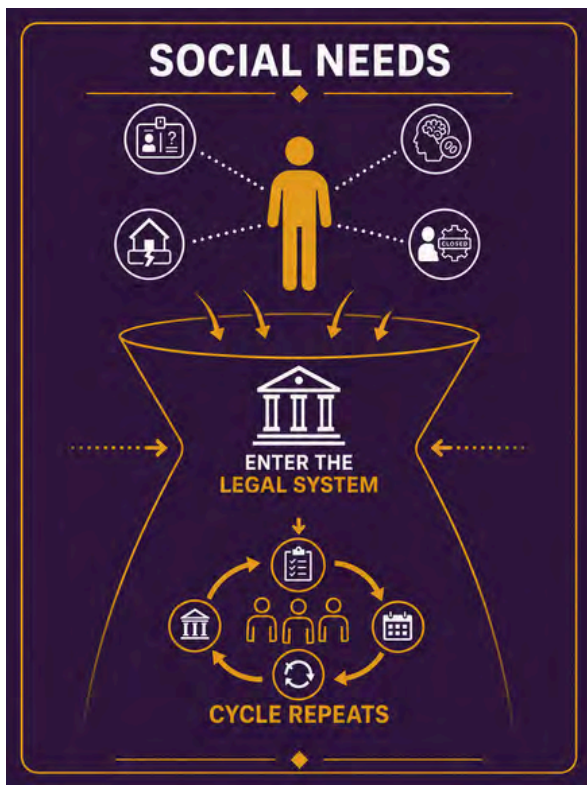
+442% increase in service connections

Why Earlier Intervention Matters

Meeting Needs Before They Become Crisis

The pilot underscored how unmet social-service needs, such as housing instability, mental-health needs, substance use, unemployment and underemployment, and limited access to basic services can make it harder to meet court requirements. Because the legal system is designed to address legal matters, these underlying needs can go unresolved.

When those needs remain unaddressed, the cycle can often continue.



Public Defender Jennifer Sellitti advocating for legislation establishing a statewide holistic representation model at the State House.

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Holistic representation moves the work of connecting people to the services they need to the beginning of the process.

— JENNIFER SELLITTI
New Jersey Public Defender

How the Pilot Worked

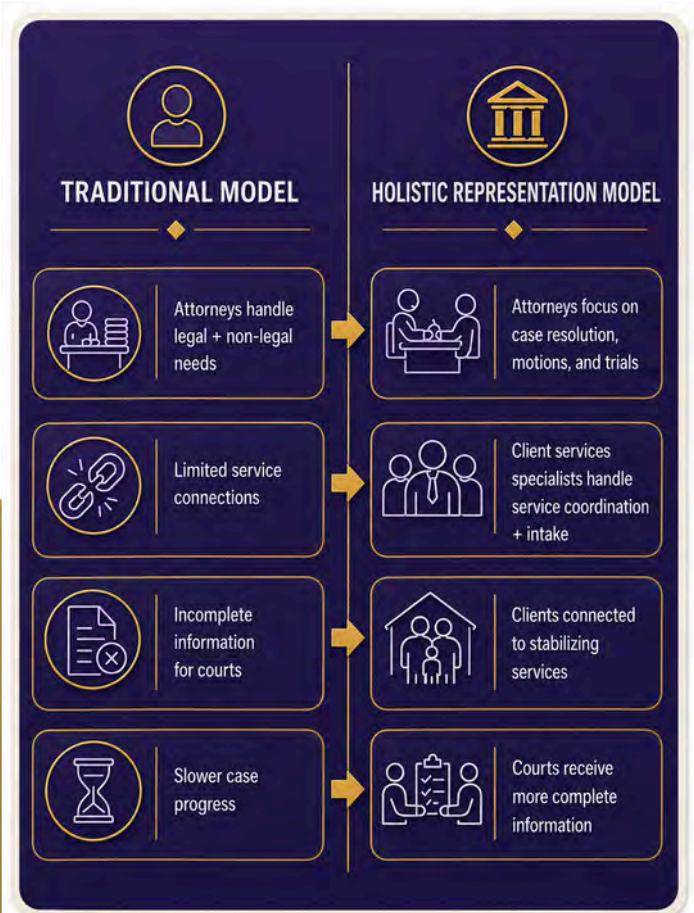
Integrating Legal Representation and Client Services

In Atlantic, Hudson, and Monmouth counties, NJOPD integrated seven Client Advocates into defense teams and revised the intake process.

Client Advocates supported intake, coordinated records and documentation, prepared powerful mitigation packages, and connected clients to community resources and supports.



An OPD Navigator reviews information to support service coordination and case preparation.



Connecting People to Stability

The Challenges Behind Court Involvement

The pilot revealed that many clients faced challenges extending beyond their legal cases. Housing instability, mental-health needs, substance use, unemployment, and difficulty accessing basic services make it harder for people to comply with court requirements and move forward successfully.

By pairing public defenders with trained specialists, NJOPD was able to identify those needs earlier and connect clients to community resources that support stability, including treatment, housing, benefits, employment, and workforce training.



WHY THIS MATTERS

When underlying needs are addressed alongside legal representation, people are better positioned to comply with court requirements, maintain stability, and move forward successfully.

Building Statewide Momentum

From Pilot Results to Statewide Capacity

The pilot helped demonstrate both the value of earlier intervention and the practical supports needed to expand holistic representation. NJOPD has continued to build on that work through strengthened referral pathways, expanded training, initial specialized staffing, and proposed legislation that would establish a statewide model.



Nearly 1,800 statewide resource links, including 700 from three pilot regions.



Introduced companion bills A4897 and S4298. Advanced statewide holistic representation model.



Expanded holistic attorney training, delivered statewide and nationally.



Hired and trained first Mitigation Specialists, accepting referrals statewide.



NJOPD joined policymakers and partners at the NJSBA Annual Meeting to lead a discussion on holistic representation.



NJOPD training integrating legal advocacy, client services, and mitigation into a team-based defense model.



A Mitigation Specialist discusses the role of interdisciplinary advocacy in supporting holistic representation.



Navigators recognized with New Jersey's Exceptional Service Award for their commitment to public service and holistic client advocacy.



Governor Mikie Sherrill speaking during the Civil Service Commission Awards ceremony.



Public Defender Jennifer Sellitti congratulates an Exceptional Service Award recipient during the Civil Service Commission Awards ceremony.



Members of NJOPD's Navigator team receive the Exceptional Service Award from the New Jersey Civil Service Commission.

Scaling Second Chances

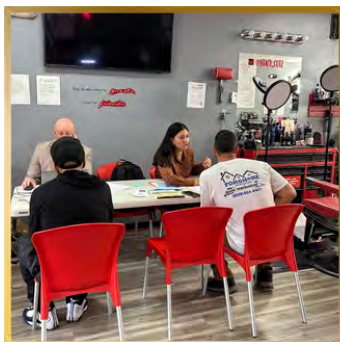
More Clinics, Greater Access



Expungement clinic at Razor Sharp Barbershop in Trenton.

This year, NJOPD's Expungement Unit brought expungement assistance directly into communities across New Jersey. Clinics were held in churches, community centers and barbershops and hair salons, making expungement services more accessible to residents seeking a fresh start.

With stronger community partnerships, the Unit increased expungement clinics from an average of 8–10 annually to more than 26 this year. These clinics helped thousands of residents who may not have had the resources to navigate the process on their own.



10,000

FY 2027
EXPUNGEMENT GOAL



Building Capacity for Lasting Impact

Strengthening the Foundation

The expansion of NJOPD's Expungement Unit was not just about holding more clinics. It was focused on building a stronger statewide model for long-term access to relief.

This year, the Unit added four staff members, invested in technology, and strengthened partnerships to make the expungement process more efficient, accessible, and sustainable.

The Unit also advanced access through legal advocacy and systems reform.

Through its appellate victory in *Matter of P.L.*, NJOPD expanded access to Recovery Court expungements. It also resolved major expungement backlogs through settlements with the State Police and the Essex County Prosecutor's Office.



Assemblywoman Annette Quijano secured critical funding for NJOPD's Expungement Unit, expanding access to second chances across New Jersey.

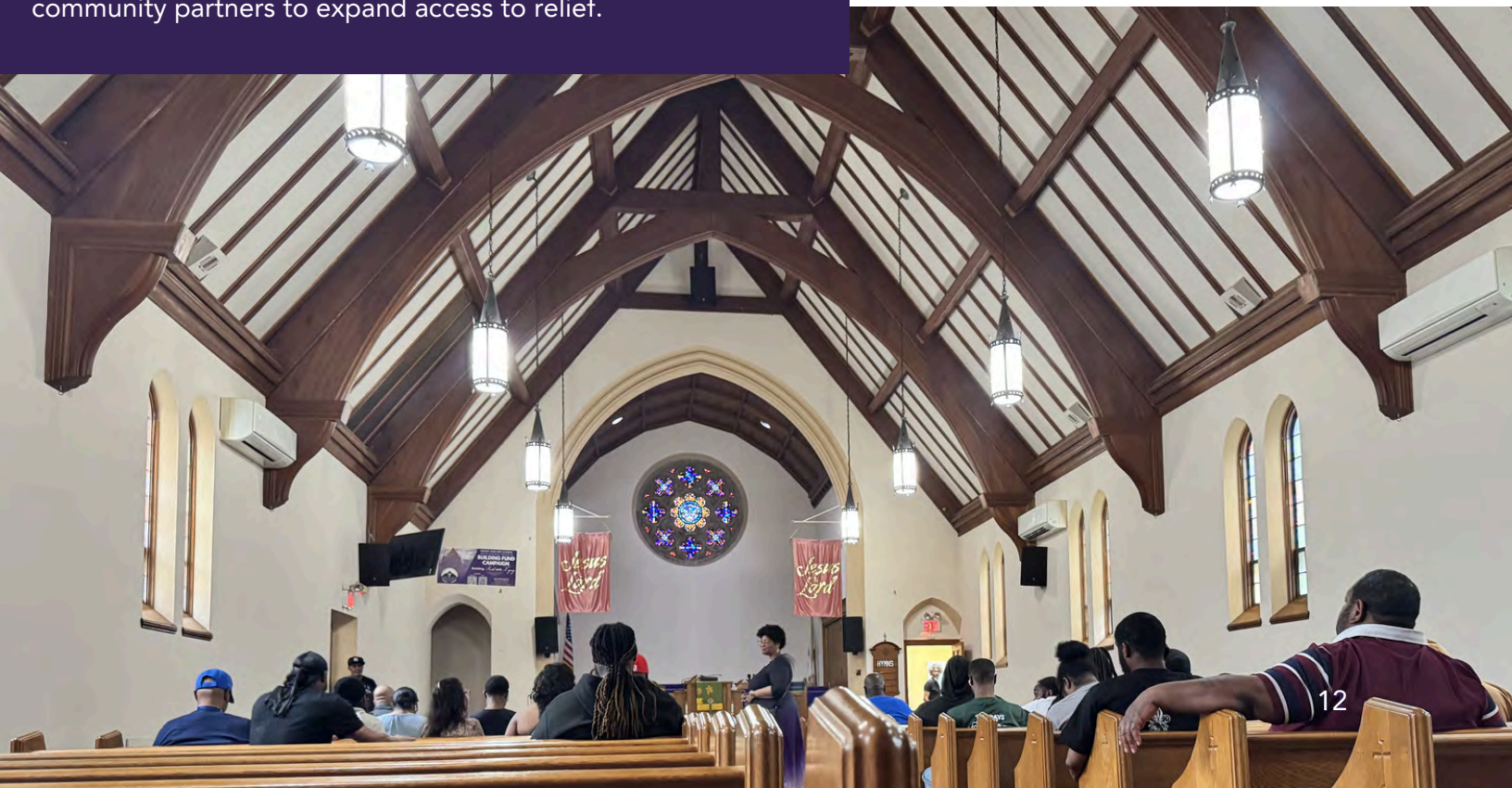


Public Defender Jennifer Sellitti joined community partners to advance strategies for expanding access to expungement relief across New Jersey.



Largest Clinic of the Year

More than 300 residents attended NJOPD's largest expungement clinic, bringing together public, private, and community partners to expand access to relief.



Community Partnerships in Action

Community leaders and NJOPD staff gathered in Bergen County to support access to expungement relief.



Community Partnerships in Action

From barbershops to restaurants, NJOPD staff hit the road across New Jersey to bring expungement services directly to the people we serve.



AI for Human-Centered Defense

Reclaiming time for advocacy, empathy, and connection

Public defense depends on people. But rising caseloads, increasing legal complexity, and growing administrative demands leave less time for the client relationships and advocacy that matter most.

This year, NJOPD advanced a strategy that uses artificial intelligence to reduce administrative burden and strengthen institutional capacity. By helping attorneys, investigators and support teams spend less time on routine tasks, these tools can create more time for advocacy, client engagement, and case preparation.

As these efforts move forward, attorneys remain responsible for legal judgment and decision-making.

Technology serves as a tool to support the work, not replace it.

“What if technology could help us be more human?”

— Jennifer Sellitti



Public Defender Jennifer Sellitti discussed NJOPD's AI at the OECD Global Roundtable on Equal Access to Justice.

Building Smarter Systems

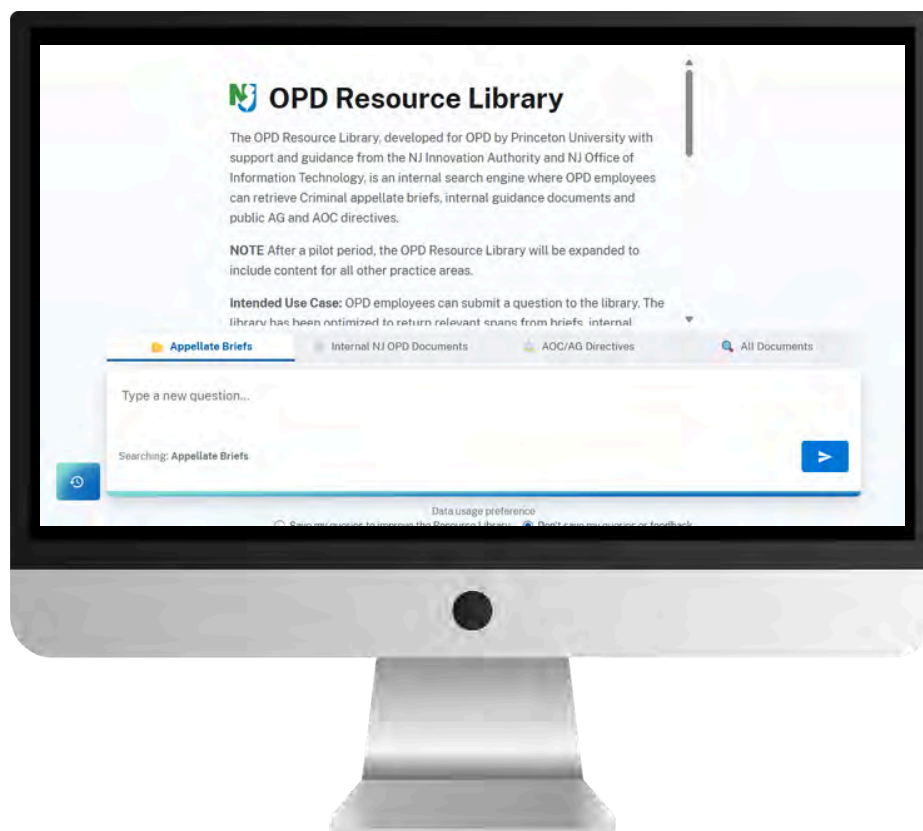
Sharing Knowledge Across NJOPD

NJOPD launched the OPD Resource Library, a custom-built, AI-powered tool developed through a collaboration among public-sector and academic partners.

By transforming decentralized knowledge across 66 offices into a shared statewide resource, NJOPD is strengthening the collective intelligence of the entire agency.

The Resource Library replaces the practice of "Frankenbriefing," the piecing together of arguments from outdated or scattered files, with a secure, expert-vetted repository of institutional legal knowledge. The tool saves valuable time while helping ensure that the quality of a client's defense is defined by NJOPD's standards of excellence, not by geography.

Decades of Institutional Knowledge Available in Seconds



Supporting Daily Public Defense Work

Human Judgment Remains Essential

NJOPD is expanding its use of AI tools to support research, case preparation, and daily operations while keeping human judgment at the center.



Workflow Support: Managing case information

NJOPD is piloting AI tools to help investigators, social service staff, and administrative personnel organize discovery, build timelines, summarize documents, and track internal case needs.



Research Support: Using external legal databases

Attorneys are using AI-assisted legal research tools within secure commercial databases to analyze case law, summarize opinions, compare legal standards, and verify citations.



Human Oversight Remains Essential

AI tools support the work of public defense professionals, but they do not replace professional judgment. Attorneys and staff remain responsible for legal analysis, strategy, confidentiality, decision-making, and client representation.





NJOPD DIVISIONS AND UNITS

Criminal Trial

Criminal Trial remains the foundation of NJOPD's work, providing representation to clients facing indictable charges in all 21 counties. From first appearance through detention hearings, motions, plea negotiations, trial, and sentencing, trial attorneys are on the front lines of protecting clients' rights and liberty.



Holistic Defense Beyond the Courtroom

Regions expanded holistic defense in several ways this year. Monmouth strengthened client-centered representation through the integration of Partners for Justice advocates, while Somerset deepened its use of navigator referrals to improve client stability. Cape May expanded access to the Mental Health Diversionary Program, while Essex partnered with Silver Lake Hospital to connect detained clients with mental health treatment. Ocean, Union, and Morris went beyond the casework, offering direct support, community outreach, and expungement help to promote stability and second chances.



Statewide Collaboration in Practice

Camden, Burlington, Hudson, Salem, and Warren spent the year strengthening collaboration in practice. Across regions, staff broke down silos among trial teams, investigators, navigators, specialized units, treatment providers, jail staff, and family members, building more coordinated systems of support and advocacy. That teamwork was on display in Hudson, where Trial staff, the Forensic Science Unit, and a Client Advocate worked together to challenge identification and DNA evidence while presenting powerful mitigation. In Warren, attorneys, a navigator, OPR, jail staff, treatment providers, and family members coordinated extensively to secure a fair outcome for a pregnant client, allowing her to give birth outside of jail.



Protecting Rights and Improving Outcomes

Bergen, Passaic, and Sussex delivered major wins through rigorous litigation and trial advocacy. Bergen challenged overly broad digital searches and secured appellate, suppression, and trial victories. Passaic won a murder acquittal by undermining cooperating-witness testimony and cell-site evidence. Sussex used suppression litigation and strong pretrial advocacy to turn a case with first-degree exposure into PTI on a reduced charge.

Youth Defense

The Youth Defense Unit represents young people facing charges in delinquency court statewide. In 2025, NJOPD strengthened this work by restructuring Youth Defense, establishing it as a specialized statewide practice area. The new structure supports consistent, developmentally informed advocacy for young people while integrating legal defense with family, school, immigration, and community support. This ensures that every child is represented by an attorney who is an expert in both the nuances of juvenile court and adolescent development.



Building a Statewide Youth Defense Practice

This year, Youth Defense restructured into three distinct regions: Northern, Central, and Southern. Each region is supported by specialist attorneys with expertise in both the legal system and adolescent development. This regional model strengthens NJOPD's holistic defense approach by ensuring young people receive representation tailored to the unique needs of youth in the juvenile legal system.



Expanding Education Advocacy

Youth Defense welcomed a dedicated education attorney to support young clients who have been removed from school or require additional educational services. The Education Advocacy Program supported 164 youth and families statewide, helping students access school enrollment, special education evaluations, IEP services, alternative education programs, and other educational supports.



Addressing Immigration Vulnerabilities

Youth Defense also collaborated with NJOPD's Immigration Unit to identify and support young clients with immigration-related vulnerabilities, including youth eligible for Special Immigrant Juvenile Status. Through more thorough screening and increased training, Youth Defense attorneys helped identify young people who may be eligible for immigration protections or proof of U.S. citizenship, ensuring these issues are addressed alongside each client's legal defense.

Parole Revocation and Resentencing

The Parole Revocation and Resentencing Unit (PRRU) represents clients facing parole revocation, parole release and discharge matters, and resentencing litigation. The Unit advocates at every stage of the revocation process and coordinates statewide sentencing relief efforts for people serving lengthy sentences for offenses committed as children, as well as clients seeking relief based on histories of trauma and abuse.



Defending Liberty in Parole Revocation Proceedings

Since its launch in October 2023, PRRU has represented more than 2,000 individuals facing parole revocation proceedings. Approximately 70% of these involved technical violations rather than new criminal charges. Through a holistic model, PRRU works with trial attorneys, investigators, and specialized NJOPD units to address the underlying issues that often contribute to parole violations and help clients remain in the community when appropriate.



Using Data to Inform Parole Reform

This year, PRRU helped inform parole reform discussions by analyzing revocation trends and testifying before lawmakers on legislation addressing technical parole violations. Drawing on NJOPD data, the Unit highlighted how housing instability, substance use disorders, and program compliance issues often drive revocation proceedings.



Expanding Opportunities for Youth Resentencing and Second Chances

PRRU continued to lead NJOPD's efforts for people serving lengthy sentences for offenses committed as children. This year, the Unit helped secure resentencing relief or parole release for more than a dozen clients, while also supporting clemency and commutation efforts that reunited families and helped long-term parolees regain independence.

Intensive Supervision Program

The Intensive Supervision Program (ISP) provides eligible individuals with a structured, community-based alternative to incarceration. NJOPD's ISP Unit advocates for clients seeking admission to the program and represents participants facing allegations of non-compliance or potential removal. Through strategic advocacy and a strong understanding of ISP's rehabilitative goals, the Unit helps clients remain in the community, continue working toward stability, and avoid unnecessary reincarceration.



Expanding Access to ISP

The Unit continued to assist people in state prison seeking access to ISP, helping clients pursue rehabilitative opportunities while supporting a program that can reduce costs associated with incarceration. This advocacy helps ensure that eligible clients have a meaningful opportunity to participate in a rigorous program focused on accountability, supervision, and reintegration.



Supporting Retention and Program Success

The Unit also represented ISP participants facing possible removal from the program. By advocating for continued participation when appropriate, the Unit helped clients remain connected to treatment, employment, family, and community supports instead of returning to prison. These efforts contributed to stronger retention and graduation outcomes.



Strengthening Collaboration and Training

This year, the ISP Unit strengthened collaboration with the ISP Program Director, the NJOPD Expungement Unit, and reentry partners. The Unit also developed an online training module to support regional NJOPD offices and county bar associations, expanding understanding of ISP applications, review processes, and advocacy strategies.

Forensic Science

The Forensic Science Unit (FSU) helps NJOPD attorneys understand, evaluate, and challenge scientific and technical evidence in criminal, youth, appellate, and child welfare cases. As forensic tools become increasingly complex, the Unit works to ensure that evidence presented in court is reliable, scientifically grounded, and subject to meaningful adversarial testing.



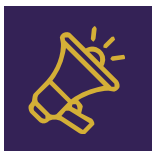
Statewide Case Support

This year, the Forensic Science Unit assisted with 536 forensic issues across 425 cases, supporting 239 attorneys throughout New Jersey, as well as Appellate, Youth Defense, and the Office of Parental Representation. The Unit also brought 23 new vendors into compliance, strengthening access to qualified expert support across the agency.



Training Across New Jersey

The Unit visited 19 New Jersey counties, delivered eight county-based presentations and hosted our Annual Forensic Science Summit, which over 200 people attended. FSU attorneys also contributed to broader professional education on topics including DNA discovery, cell site location evidence, ballistics, strangulation, and facial recognition technology.



Advocacy in Every Level of Court

FSU attorneys appeared in courts statewide, litigating issues involving buccal swabs, geofences, ballistics, facial recognition software, and other emerging forensic technologies.

FSU achieved significant success, including published victories. In *State v. Tybear Miles*, the Supreme Court held that defendants have a right to discovery about facial recognition technology used in investigations against them. In *State v. James Hunter and Phillip Bryant*, the Appellate Division held a tower dump warrant unconstitutional, with implications for all tower dump warrants.

FSU attorneys also secured trial court wins, including a favorable outcome in a homicide case based on genetic genealogy, suppression of ALPR results, and an acquittal in a case involving the review of medical records, consultation with a defense expert, and cross-examination preparation.

Police Accountability

The Police Accountability Team supports NJOPD attorneys in identifying, litigating, and challenging police misconduct, discovery violations, and unconstitutional law enforcement practices. Through collaboration with trial and appellate attorneys, the Team helps ensure that clients have access to critical information and that constitutional protections are enforced in court.



Advancing Collaborative Litigation

This year, the Team worked with trial and appellate attorneys on an important Brady violation involving discovery that had not been turned over by the prosecution. Through coordinated briefing and oral argument, NJOPD challenged the violation and advanced the client's due process rights.



Securing Police Discipline Records

NJOPD successfully argued before the Appellate Division that the Office should have a common law right of access to major discipline records involving law enforcement officers. The decision recognized that NJOPD should not have less access to internal affairs information than other members of the public and strengthened the ability of defenders to identify information that may be relevant to impeachment, discovery, policy advocacy, and public discourse.



Strengthening Statewide Support

The Team expanded its capacity this year with the addition of a full-time attorney dedicated to Police Accountability. Working with paralegal and policy staff, the Team responded to requests from trial attorneys across the state, drafted motions and briefs, supported interlocutory appeals and remands, and helped attorneys navigate complex police accountability litigation.

Recovery Court

NJOPD's Recovery Court Unit supports attorneys representing clients seeking admission to and participating in Recovery Court, a program designed for individuals living with substance use disorders. The Unit helps strengthen advocacy from initial application through program completion by providing training, resources, and statewide coordination.



Enhancing Recovery Court Representation

This year, the Unit developed a comprehensive Recovery Court training for trial attorneys statewide. The training provided a practical overview of the program, explained complex legal and clinical admission requirements, and offered strategies for overcoming barriers to eligibility.



Fostering Statewide Collaboration

The Unit established quarterly statewide meetings for Recovery Court attorneys to promote collaboration, shared problem solving, and consistency across counties. These meetings helped attorneys address challenges that arose throughout a participant's time in the program, from admission through completion.



Creating a Centralized Resource Library

The Unit also created and maintained a centralized SharePoint resource library with sample briefs, case law, best practices, and other materials. Together, these initiatives have strengthened Recovery Court advocacy statewide and helped expand access to a critical, life-changing program.

Criminal Trial Appellate

The Criminal Trial Appellate Section represents clients in appeals before the Appellate Division and New Jersey Supreme Court while supporting trial attorneys throughout the state on complex legal issues. Through appellate advocacy, strategic litigation, and close collaboration with trial teams, the Section works to protect constitutional rights, develop favorable legal precedent, and strengthen representation across NJOPD.



Shaping Legal Precedent Through Appellate Advocacy

This year, the Appellate Section filed 381 Appellate Division briefs, argued 86 plenary appeals, and represented more than 400 individuals on the Sentencing Oral Argument calendar. The Section also filed 25 Supreme Court briefs, argued 16 Supreme Court cases, and submitted 258 petitions for certification, resulting in 91 Appellate Division victories and 12 favorable Supreme Court decisions.



Expanding Interlocutory Review

The Section launched a statewide initiative to increase interlocutory and emergent appeals in appropriate cases. Appellate liaisons visited all 21 counties to train trial attorneys and provide sample materials, practical resources, and guidance on when interlocutory review is appropriate, how to draft persuasive motions for leave to appeal, and how to navigate Appellate Division filing procedures. The initiative strengthened trial-appellate collaboration and increased interlocutory appeals statewide.



Trial-Appellate Partnerships

Through appellate liaisons assigned statewide, the Section supported trial attorneys on complex legal issues, preservation of appellate claims, interlocutory litigation, and emerging areas of law. The partnership also helped identify recurring county-level issues, support targeted training, and advance collaboration on police accountability, youth defense, compassionate release, and mental health litigation.

Conviction Integrity

The Conviction Integrity Unit (CIU) represents clients in post-conviction matters involving constitutional violations, newly discovered evidence, ineffective assistance of counsel, and other claims that call the reliability or fairness of a conviction into question. The Unit works collaboratively across NJOPD to identify errors, pursue relief, and ensure that clients receive meaningful review of their cases.



Advancing Post-Conviction Training

This year, CIU hosted its 35 attorneys for an in-person summit in Newark. The daylong training brought together presenters from Appellate, Special Litigation, Immigration, Mental Health, and other NJOPD practice areas, with sessions focused on brief writing, mental health defenses, trial court issues, immigration consequences, and post-conviction relief strategies.



Securing a New Trial

In *State v. Latimar Byrdsell*, the Appellate Division affirmed the trial court's decision granting post-conviction relief and vacating a murder conviction. DNA testing showed Mr. Byrdsell was not a contributor to key evidence, and CIU attorneys successfully argued that trial counsel's failure to pursue DNA testing or a DNA expert denied him effective assistance of counsel.



Reducing Unjust Sentences and Consequences

CIU also achieved significant outcomes through negotiated resolutions after identifying constitutional violations in prior proceedings. These included resentencing one client from 55 years to 18 years, removing another from Megan's Law and Parole Supervision for Life requirements, resolving three cases to eliminate immigration consequences, and securing two new sentencing hearings.

Office of Law Guardian

The Office of the Law Guardian (OLG) represents children in child welfare matters across New Jersey, advocating for their safety, stability, wishes, and legal rights. This year, OLG advanced protections for children in court, in legislation, and in the everyday decisions that shape their lives.



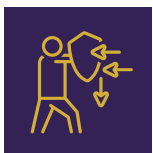
Protecting Foster Youth Benefits

This year, legislation was signed ending New Jersey's long-standing practice of using foster children's Social Security benefits to pay for their care. The new law ensures those benefits remain with children in out-of-home placements, preserving resources that can support stability as they transition into adulthood. OLG's years of motion practice, advocacy, and appellate strategy helped lay the groundwork for this important change.



Supporting Aging-Out Youth

Through the NJOLG "We Care Initiative," the team continued providing holiday support to young people aging out of care. With an annual stipend and a matching contribution from ShopRite, OLG provided 212 \$100 grocery gift cards to clients in need, helping offset rising food costs and offering practical support during the holiday season.



Defending Children's Constitutional Rights

OLG also strengthened its rights-based advocacy for children involved in the child welfare system. A statewide training for attorneys and staff focused on litigating children's constitutional rights, including due process, family integrity, sibling relationships, personal safety, liberty interests, and property rights. Law Guardians pursued motions, hearings, and appeals to ensure children's positions and constitutional interests were fully recognized in proceedings affecting their lives.

Office of Parental Representation

The Office of Parental Representation (OPR) advocates for parents in child welfare matters, protecting family integrity, due process, and meaningful participation in proceedings that can permanently affect parent-child relationships.



Reimagining Termination of Parental Rights (TPR)

OPR hosted a statewide summit for attorneys focused on reimagining termination of parental rights through client-centered advocacy. Inspired by the American Bar Association's End TPR initiative, the summit included presentations on constitutional challenges, the financial forces behind termination proceedings, and approaches to rethinking TPR in New Jersey. A client voice panel also gave former clients the opportunity to share how termination proceedings affected their lives.



Challenging Delayed Agency Findings

OPR-Appellate advanced a strategy to address delayed abuse and neglect findings where parents were never properly notified of their right to challenge agency determinations. In one case, OPR helped a mother regain employment after a decades-old finding was changed from "substantiated" to "not substantiated." This work helped protect due process rights and challenge the lasting consequences of delayed agency action.



Centering Client Voice and Specialized Advocacy

OPR attorneys presented at statewide conferences and NJOPD trainings on issues affecting parents in child welfare proceedings, including client voice, cognitive disabilities, ethics, and responsible use of AI. These efforts helped strengthen collaboration across stakeholders and reinforced OPR's commitment to representation that recognizes the lived experiences, abilities, and needs of parents.



Strengthening Families and Building Permanency

The OPR Social Work Program provided support and case management services to 129 families, helping improve safety, stability, and access to community resources. The team achieved 18 family reunifications and 9 Kinship Legal Guardianships, advancing permanency outcomes for children and families. Additionally, the program mentored 6 social work interns, helping prepare the next generation of child welfare professionals.

Immigration

The Immigration Unit advises NJOPD attorneys and clients on the immigration consequences of criminal, juvenile, family, mental health, and post-conviction matters. Through consultation, training, and direct advocacy, the Unit helps ensure that noncitizen clients receive informed representation and that immigration consequences are considered throughout the course of a case.



Providing Immigration Guidance Statewide

In 2025, the Immigration Unit provided guidance in more than 1,000 cases across NJOPD practice areas. The Unit delivered Padilla advisals on more than 900 cases arising in all 21 counties and worked closely with attorneys statewide to help clients understand how criminal charges and case outcomes may affect their immigration status.



Identifying Immigration Concerns Earlier

This year, the Immigration Unit expanded a holistic intake-screening initiative to five counties, allowing immigration concerns to be identified at a client's earliest contact with NJOPD. Through this effort, the Unit tracked 790 clients from case initiation, identified those transferred to ICE custody, and helped defenders maintain contact, avoid unnecessary bench warrants, and ensure uninterrupted representation.



Protecting Pathways to Citizenship and Stability

The Immigration Unit also helped clients secure and document lawful immigration status. This included assisting individuals in long-term civil commitment settings with naturalization applications and identifying clients who had derived U.S. citizenship through a parent but lacked formal documentation. Working in partnership with other NJOPD units, the Immigration Unit also helped youth clients pursue Special Immigrant Juvenile Status and other forms of immigration relief, ensuring that immigration vulnerabilities were addressed alongside legal representation.



Expanding Knowledge and Advocacy

In 2025, the Immigration Unit strengthened statewide advocacy through trainings for NJOPD staff, outside organizations, law schools, and community partners. The team presented on immigration law, youth defense, criminal court impacts, and protections for vulnerable noncitizens.

Mental Health Advocacy

The Division of Mental Health Advocacy (DMHA) advanced client advocacy this year through expanded digital access to hospital records, sustained discharge advocacy, and statewide implementation of mental health diversion programs. These efforts strengthened due process, improved preparation for hearings, promoted pathways out of commitment, and expanded client-centered alternatives across New Jersey.



Improving Access to Hospital Records

DMHA secured CareLink access with many short-term care facilities across New Jersey, giving attorneys and investigators real-time digital access to client hospital records. This allowed teams to review discovery before hearings, better understand each client's hospitalization and treatment status, and respond more effectively to hospital testimony.



Promoting Discharge and Rehabilitation

The Alternate Commitment Unit helped move close to 100 people into some stage of the discharge process, representing approximately one quarter of the population currently civilly committed to the Special Treatment Unit. This reflects sustained advocacy focused on rehabilitation, release planning, and meaningful pathways out of commitment.



Implementing Mental Health Diversion

Mental Health Diversion Programs moved into the implementation phase this year and now exist in various forms in all but two counties. NJOPD worked with the OAG, county prosecutors, judges, and AOC partners to promote client access, protect due process, and keep diversion practices grounded in client-centered advocacy.

Special Litigation

The Special Litigation Unit (SLU) pursues complex litigation and systemic advocacy on issues affecting NJOPD clients statewide. This year, the Unit advanced significant work involving immigration detention, sentencing relief, expungement delays, and due process protections in parole proceedings.



Protecting Court Access for Detained Clients

SLU participated as amicus curiae in *Doe v. U.S. Department of Homeland Security*, a federal class action involving noncitizens detained at the Moshannon Valley Processing Center. The Unit argued that people in immigration detention must have meaningful access to their New Jersey criminal proceedings, including the ability to appear remotely when in-person appearances are not feasible.



Securing Relief from Megan's Law and PSL

SLU filed 278 motions statewide seeking removal from Megan's Law and release from Parole Supervision for Life (PSL) for clients who had remained offense-free in the community for more than 15 years. Courts granted approximately 95% of those motions, allowing clients to move forward without restrictions that were no longer necessary.



Eliminating Expungement Backlogs

In collaboration with the Expungement Unit and Essex County Trial Region, SLU litigated a backlog of approximately 671 expungement petitions pending in Essex County. The resulting settlement eliminated the backlog by March 2026 and created new policies to prevent future delays, helping hundreds of people move forward with cleared records.

Investigations

The Investigations Unit supports NJOPD attorneys across practice areas by gathering facts, locating witnesses, reviewing records, observing critical interactions, and helping build the factual foundation needed for effective representation. This year's work showed the impact investigators have in criminal, child welfare, and family integrity matters.



Supporting Family Reunification

In an Office of Parental Representation matter, a dedicated Investigator observed supervised visits between a client and her children. Through professionalism, rapport-building, and careful documentation, she helped create a supportive environment and provided objective observations that contributed to the client's reunification with her children.



Collaborating Toward Acquittal

In a criminal trial matter, an Essex Trial Investigator played a key role after a client's life sentence was overturned and the case returned for retrial. His investigation support, collaboration with trial counsel, and responsiveness throughout hearings and trial helped contribute to the client's acquittal after more than 13 years of incarceration.



Enhancing Child Advocacy

The Office of Law Guardian Investigative team developed new tools to strengthen advocacy around education and special education needs for child clients. These resources help investigators gather better information from clients, caregivers, and schools, supporting more tailored educational services and stronger outcomes for children in the child welfare system.

Training

The Office of Training supports NJOPD's commitment to excellence by developing programs that strengthen advocacy, deepen subject matter knowledge, and prepare staff to meet emerging challenges across practice areas. This year, the Office expanded statewide training opportunities through the return of the Defender Summit, a year-long new attorney curriculum, and programming on the responsible use of AI tools.



Return of the Defender Summit

In 2026, NJOPD brought back the Defender Summit, welcoming more than 750 attorneys, investigators, administrative staff, pool attorneys, members of the private bar, and stakeholders from across the state. The Summit featured national and local faculty and offered training across multiple disciplines, including forensics, administration, child welfare, and criminal defense.



Developing New Defenders

The Criminal Trial New Attorney class participated in a year-long training program focused on litigation skills, subject matter knowledge, and NJOPD's holistic defense model. The curriculum included immigration, appellate practice, forensics, investigations, client-centered advocacy, direct examination, search and seizure, and a week-long trial skills program.



Training for Responsible AI Use

The Office of Training partnered with IT to support NJOPD's adoption of AI tools in a safe and effective way. Trainings, panel discussions, and office hours helped staff understand how to integrate tools such as NJ AI Assistant and Westlaw CoCounsel into daily workflows while maintaining professional responsibility and appropriate safeguards.

People and Culture

The Office of People and Culture supports NJOPD's workforce through recruitment, engagement, mentorship, and professional development. This year, the Office helped attract new talent, strengthen employee connection, and prepare the next generation of public defenders and advocates.



Attracting Top Talent

NJOPD received record applications, up about 60%, from law students, clerks, and attorneys across New Jersey and nationwide. NJOPD expanded agency-wide recruitment efforts through law schools, colleges, career fairs, and outreach events, attracting diverse and highly qualified candidates for attorney and non-attorney positions. The agency will welcome more than 40 new defenders in the fall of FY 2027.



Building Community and Connection

NJOPD launched a formal mentorship program that drew nearly 100 applications and created more than 25 mentor-mentee matches. The agency also hosted programs celebrating diverse experiences and expanded community outreach statewide. NJOPD hosted nearly a dozen programs recognizing diverse histories, identities, and experiences, strengthening dialogue and collaboration across community, government, academic, and public-private partners.



Preparing Tomorrow's Defenders

NJOPD welcomed nearly 200 student interns from approximately two dozen law schools, undergraduate programs, and social work programs. Working alongside NJOPD staff, interns gained hands-on experience and mentorship in criminal defense, child welfare, mental health advocacy, appellate practice, and specialized units. They supported clients through research, writing, investigations, court appearances, service referrals, and collaboration with interdisciplinary defense teams.

Division of Administration

The Division of Administration supports NJOPD's statewide operations by managing systems, resources, and processes that allow attorneys, investigators, advocates, and staff to serve clients more effectively. This year, the Division advanced technology, case management, and workflow improvements designed to increase efficiency across the agency.



Expanding Digital Resources

The Division helped acquire and integrate advanced tools, including specialized licenses for Westlaw CoCounsel/AI and Evidence.com. It also supported the launch of the OPD Resource Library, a custom-built, AI-powered, statewide tool that improved access to shared legal resources, institutional knowledge, attorney-authored work product, and agency-wide guidance.



Improving Case Management

The Division implemented the PROMIS/Gavel case management interface, strengthening NJOPD's ability to receive, manage, and track case information more efficiently. This improvement supported better coordination, reduced reliance on manual processes, and enhanced the agency's ability to handle legal matters across practice areas.



Streamlining Operations

The Division continued transitioning to a paperless environment and streamlined processes throughout its work. These changes increased efficiency, reduced reliance on paper, and supported more modern, sustainable operations.



NJOPD IN ACTION

NJOPD Community Connections



NJOPD Empowering Defenders



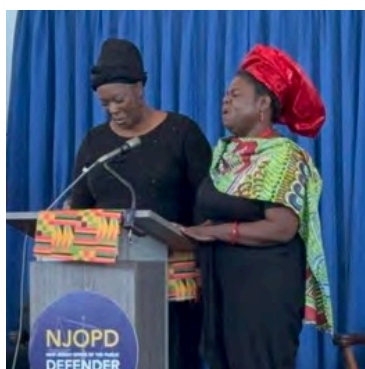
NJOPD Empowering Defenders



NJOPD Team Moments



NJOPD Team Moments





FOLLOW THE NJOPD FOR MORE UPDATES!

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