




Resilience in Holistic Defense: “Sustaining Ourselves While Serving Others”

Angelene Musawwir, LCSW
CCPD – August 12, 2025



Why Are We Here Today

- The **prevention** and **detection** requirement is all about giving attorneys the know-how and practical tools to spot and handle well-being concerns both in **themselves and in their colleagues**.

(The Bar Association of San Francisco
4/2025)



Three Main Points :

Define Resilience

Recognize signs of Burnout
and Stress

Identify strategies to prevent
Burnout and pathways for
support and treatment



Instructions

There will be 2 polls!

The polls are anonymous

**The polls will generate
word clouds**

(The more participation the
better it will be!)

**Use your cell phones to
click the QR**



What is Resilience in Public Defense

The ability of Public Defenders and their offices:
To cope with, adapt, and
recover from the intense
stressors of this work.

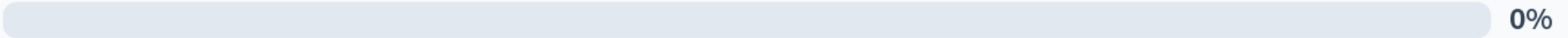


Can Resilience Be Developed?

- Resilience: is **not just about enduring** these stressors and hardships but about **developing** skills and mindset to **thrive and sustain in this work, while serving others** .

What Brought you to this work?

(A) Giving a voice to voiceless



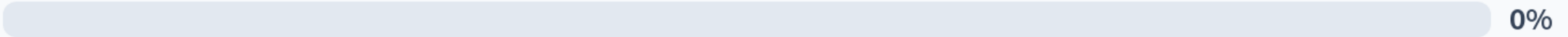
(B) I am good at what I do, I want to help others with this skill



(C) I have Passion for Justice and Equity



(D) Upholding constitutional rights



(E) Being a Public Defender is a part of who I am



Challenges Of Working in Public Defense





Challenges for Public Defenders

- *High caseloads* : Public defenders often handle significantly higher caseloads than national standards recommend. (*Understanding the National Public Defense Workload Study 2023*).



Challenges for Public Defenders

- *High caseloads* : Public defenders often handle significantly higher caseloads than national standards recommend. (*Understanding the National Public Defense Workload Study 2023*).
- *Lack of Resources*: Public defense offices frequently lack adequate resources, including investigators and support staff. (*Rubin, California 2025*)



Challenges for Public Defenders

- *High caseloads* : Public defenders often handle significantly higher caseloads than national standards recommend. (*Understanding the National Public Defense Workload Study 2023*)
- *Lack of Resources*: Public defense offices frequently lack adequate resources, including investigators and support staff.
(*Rubin, California is failing to provide a vital safeguard against wrongful convictions 2025*)
- *Emotional Strain and lack of boundaries* : Long hours, adversarial roles, and client trauma contribute to emotional strain.
(*Smith, J. 2020*)



Challenges for Public Defenders

- **Exposure to repeated trauma:** Repeated exposure to the traumatic experiences and stories of their clients, leading to similar symptoms as direct trauma.



Challenges for Public Defenders

- **Exposure to repeated trauma** : Repeated exposure to the traumatic experiences and stories of their clients, leading to similar symptoms as direct trauma.
- Recognizing and understanding **transference and countertransference**



Challenges for Public Defenders

*Transference : when a client projects **feelings, attitudes, or expectations from past relationships onto you, often without realizing it!***



Challenges for Public Defenders

Countertransference :your emotional reaction to the client, influenced by your own past experiences, biases, or unresolved issues, **most of the time, people are unaware of this.**



Challenges for Public Defenders

- **Vicarious trauma/secondary traumatic stress:** Repeated exposure to the traumatic experiences and stories of their clients, leading to similar symptoms as direct trauma.
- Recognizing and understanding **transference and countertransference**
- *Representing non- citizens client in crisis in adverse political climate: **The feeling of not being able to address all the issues, when you are inherently in a helping profession***



Challenges for Public Defenders

- **Vicarious trauma/secondary traumatic stress:** Repeated exposure to the traumatic experiences and stories of their clients, leading to similar symptoms as direct trauma.
- Recognizing and understanding **transference and countertransference**
- *Representing non- citizens client in crisis in adverse political climate: **The feeling of not being able to address all the issues, when you are inherently in a helping profession***
- ***Pressure to go to trial***



What Happens If the Challenges of the Work Become Overwhelming

- *According studies as recent from organization such as ABA reports that:*
 - *28% of lawyers report symptoms of depression,*
 - *19% exhibit anxiety symptoms,*
 - *21% qualify as problem drinkers,*
 - *Attorneys are impacted Vicarious Trauma and other stress related issues*
 - **Attorneys are less likely to seek treatment**
-
- **The California Lawyers Association is participating with the ABA currently conducting another study to compliment the last study from 2016 and published in 2017. It's been 10 years since the last study, however, there have been some effort in ensuring attorneys learn about the negative/concerning emotional and behavioral symptoms that impact individuals due to the nature of the work*

Burnout - Recognize It





Burnout - Recognize It

- Burnout: Develops over time, linked to work and **is treatable**.



Burnout - Recognize It

- Burnout: What does it look like, what does it feel like
- **Emotional exhaustion-** The state of feeling emotionally drained and depleted due to the chronic stress and demands of this work! It can contribute to the stresses that you are feeling in our personal life!



Burnout - Recognize It

- Defining Burnout: Develops over time, linked to work and can be treatable.
- Emotional exhaustion- The state of feeling emotionally drained and depleted due to the chronic stress and demands of this work.
- **Depersonalization, Cynicism or Anger –Powerlessness towards the system - acts as a defense mechanism for the person, who is responding to what is perceived as an increasingly and hopelessly corrupt system.**



Burnout - Recognize It

- Defining Burnout: Develops over time, linked to work and can be treatable.
- Emotional exhaustion- The state of feeling emotionally drained and depleted due to the chronic stress and demands of this work .
- Depersonalization, Cynicism or Anger –Powerlessness towards the system - acts as a defense mechanism for the person, who is responding to what is perceived as an increasingly and hopelessly corrupt system. .
- **Reduced professional accomplishment - Or the person feels as if they are not able to make accomplish the things they would too.**

Compassion Fatigue

- **Compassion Fatigue** - Develops over time, and is treatable.
(it's all treatable you first have to recognize it)



Compassion Fatigue

- **Compassion Fatigue:** -Compassion fatigue : Compassion fatigue for public defenders arises from the cumulative exposure to the trauma, suffering, and injustices experienced by their clients. It's not just about being tired from overwork (which is burnout), but about the profound emotional and psychological toll of empathetically engaging with stories of violence, abuse, poverty, mental illness, and systemic oppression. It can lead to a fundamental shift in a public defender's worldview, making them feel less safe, more cynical, and even detached
(NCAD, Overcoming Vicarious Trauma for Legal Professionals 2025)



Burnout vs. Compassion Fatigue

Burnout

- The main Cause – chronic workplace Stress,
- Emotional exhaustion etc.
- Happens over time

Compassion Fatigue

- The main cause prolonged exposure to client trauma
- Result in some secondary trauma symptoms (intrusive thoughts, hypervigilance, avoidance)
- If not addressed with specific incidents, can spread across case loads.



Vicarious Trauma

- Vicarious Trauma : **VT develops gradually through repeated exposure to clients' trauma, whereas secondary trauma can result from a single, acute exposure.**
(NCAD, 2025)

Identify What Is Going on

Emotional	Behavioral	Physical
Sadness, emotional numbness	Increased use of alcohol, Misuse of medications	Sleep disturbance
Irritability/restlessness	Short tempered, difficulty concentration	Decreased energy, short tempered with family or friends
Feelings of guilt/helplessness	Procrastination, avoiding other or situations	Pain, unexplained headaches, hair loss, stomach issues
Feelings of Anxiety	Difficulty concentration	Feelings of restless/struggles with emotional regulation
Self injurious thoughts or thoughts of harming others	Misuse of substances, avoidance of responsibilities, disruptions in personal relationships,	Appetite change, change in weight, fatigue, mood swings (PA), fear





Public Defender's Keep Showing up!

Despite the challenges and stress, attorneys continue to enter into criminal defense and specifically become Public Defenders. There have been studies by universities, by various legal agencies that are addressing:

Burnout, Vicarious Trauma, Compassion fatigue, Workplace Dissatisfaction,

BUT

many of those studies also highlight that there are a lot of PD's who desire to do this work, who continue to do this work!

What Must Be Done to Ensure Public Defenders Stay In this Work

Motivated to Do this Work

Stay Resilient in this Work



Why Do Defender's Stay

- “I am not sure if I would want to do anything else, I think my personality is the best for this job, I would be bored doing anything else.”
- “I have to do this job, these F*ing DA's are terrible, they want screw everyone”
- “If the DA's understood what was going for “clients” they would do better”
- “I know if I do my best, I can help people, even if it's just a few people, I will not stop trying”

Why Do Defender's Stay

- Fighting for people has always been a part of who I am. This job is hard and stressful , but this is what I want to do.

Why Do Defender's Stay

- Fighting for people has always been a part of how I am. This job is hard and stressful , but this is what I want to do
- I didn't go to school to be a lawyer; I went to law school to be a Public Defender (4x different people said with and without expletives)



Why Do Defender's Stay

- Fighting for people has always been a part of how I am. This job is hard and stressful , but this is what I want to do
- I didn't go to school to be a lawyer; I went to law school to be a Public Defender (4x different people said with and without expletives)
- I thrive off of the stress, the trial and the ability to help people.



Build Resilience , Be Effective and Be Well

- **Set boundaries**
- **Techniques that assist during intense moments**
- Health and Wellness
- **Peer Support**
- Caseloads
- **Remember your why and know your limits**
- Find a source of joy (big and small)
- **Seek Support**



Setting Boundaries

- Work to set limits on work hours (There are times you should leave no later than 5 pm,)
- Establish communication norms (Emails are important but sending emails at 8 pm...)
- Schedule Recovery Time (If it can't be daily or weekly, make it one or twice a months)
- Push back on unrealistic demands (Respectfully communicate with supervisors when something isn't sustainable)
- Start small, write out what is important to you and start implementing setting boundaries



Peer support

- Peer support is essential in Public Defense because the work is emotionally, mentally, and ethically demanding in ways that few outside the field fully understand.

Talk to your colleagues So smart! So fun! Such amazing people!

CoCo County Defender-2025



Peer support

- Talk to your colleagues So smart! So fun! Such amazing people!
- Stop reinventing the wheel! - Ask for help, ask what's worked before!



Peer support

- Talk to your colleagues So smart! So fun! Such amazing people!
- We need to stop reinventing the wheel! - Ask what's worked before!
- Look around and remember that you are not alone



Peer support

- Talk to your colleagues So smart! So fun! Such amazing people!
- We need to stop reinventing the wheel! - Ask what's worked before!
- Look around and remember that you are not alone
- Talk to the clerks, clerical, social workers anyone who is curious– explaining why you came to this work reminds us of the mission and what we do for our individual clients



Peer support

- Talk to your colleagues So smart! So fun! Such amazing people!
- We need to stop reinventing the wheel! - Ask what's worked before!
- Look around and remember that you are not alone
- Talk to the clerks – explaining why we came to this work reminds us of the mission and what we do for our individual clients
- Find your office bestie who won't judge you and who you can always be yourself with



Peer support

- Talk to your colleagues So smart! So fun! Such amazing people!
- We need to stop reinventing the wheel! - Ask what's worked before!
- Look around and remember that you are not alone
- Talk to the clerks – explaining why we came to this work reminds us of the mission and what we do for our individual clients
- Find your office bestie who won't judge you and who you can always be yourself with
- Be honest about challenges – you would be surprised how much help we can give each other



Peer support

- Talk to your colleagues So smart! So fun! Such amazing people!
- We need to stop reinventing the wheel! - Ask what's worked before!
- Look around and remember that you are not alone
- Talk to the clerks – explaining why we came to this work reminds us of the mission and what we do for our individual clients
- Find your office bestie who won't judge you and who you can always be yourself with
- Be honest about challenges – you would be surprised how much help we can give each other
- Go home, wherever that is, go home and work on making you space away from the office one that you enjoy being.



Remember The **Why** During Chaos

- Reconnect with the original motivation - A defender said, it's wrong for people to have to fight this system, it's unfair and you should not have to pay to be represented, it wrong, that is why I am here, I love this job"
- I thrive off of this chaos, the people that work here are insane to be here because this job is so hard but, fighting for people who need help has been me my whole life
- The law is complicated and complex and if I can help someone understand this rigged system and get the best outcome, I am here for this every day. It's just so hard and sometimes you have to do hard"



Seek Support



Therapy/Counseling: If you're experiencing symptoms of compassion fatigue or burnout, seek professional mental health support. A therapist who understands vicarious trauma in legal professionals can be invaluable.



Peer Support: Connect with other public defenders or lawyers who understand the unique challenges of the profession. Sharing experiences can be validating and reduce feelings of isolation.



Mentorship: Find mentors who have successfully navigated the profession while maintaining their well-being.

Professional Resources

- Lawyers Assistance Program Located on the The State Bar Of California Websites : offers self assessment designed for legal professionals
- Anxiety Assessment, Depression Assessment, The Twenty Questions
- American Bar Association
- County Employee Assistance Program
- Contact Health Care Provider
- Crisis line 988



During the intense moments - Quick Takeaways

Box Breathing - In for 4 out for 4 repeat 4 times.

Progressive Muscle relaxation/
Body Scan

Grounding - listen to the
sounds around you (5-4-3-2-1)

Outside (if you can)

Take Aways

Recognize

Recognize when things are tough for you and those around you

Identify

Identify habits that have become unhealthy

Talk

Talk to someone that you trust, that will give you honest feedback

Ask

Ask For Help (Colleagues/ Management)

Take Aways



Practice self care when things are going well so when things are hard you know how to care for yourself and others around you



Be kind to yourself so that when you have to go hard you can protect the soft places (your mind/mental health your body)

A high-speed photograph of a water droplet hitting a surface, creating a series of concentric ripples. The droplet is captured mid-air, just above the point of impact, with a smaller droplet trailing behind it. The ripples are clearly visible, spreading outwards from the center. The background is a dark, muted blue-grey color.

Thoughts/Reflections
