



**PARTNERS
FOR JUSTICE**

2025 ANNUAL REPORT

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WHY PUBLIC DEFENSE?

Well-resourced public defenders can transform the legal system and shape the future of public safety. The power of public defense is needed now more than ever as our fundamental rights face unprecedented threats. Public defenders can leverage their broad reach to play a critical role in plugging these service gaps while continuing to provide zealous representation.

Our work is not just about securing favorable outcomes for our clients or protecting their fundamental rights. It's about ensuring that when people walk out of the courtroom, they have the support not just to survive but to thrive, and break the cycle of incarceration for good.

LOW-LEVEL, NON-SERIOUS OFFENSES MAKE UP MORE THAN

80% of arrests

8 out of 10 people

CANNOT AFFORD A LAWYER AND RELY ON THE PUBLIC DEFENSE SYSTEM

“ People go to jail more than 7 million times every year, with 1 in 5 arrested more than once. ”

SO, WHY PUBLIC DEFENDERS?

- 1 Public defenders are a readily available, high-impact existing provider that is often overlooked, since most efforts to address this crisis focus on policing, prosecution, or reentry systems.
- 2 Public defenders have immense reach, working with about 80% of people accused of crimes.
- 3 Public defenders are upstream, automatically assigned (with an extremely low barrier to entry), and can foster trust through full, legally protected confidentiality.



TIME RETURNED

An analysis of 928 individuals revealed that PFJ and public defenders returned about 4,000 years to clients in 2024 when comparing their outcomes to the initial exposure faced in their case—that's just over four years per person. When clients did receive a custodial sentence, the sentence was **1.6 years compared to 6.7 years nationally**—a reduction of 76%.

The hundreds of cases resolved without prison time meant that more people were in their communities, their homes, and with their families rather than behind bars. While this analysis quantifies the transformative effect of Collaborative Defense on the legal system, the radiating impact on individuals and their communities is immeasurable.

OUR IMPACT

Returning even one day of freedom to someone facing incarceration can be life-changing. Research shows that exposure to incarceration—a high-violence, low-care environment—**increases the likelihood of future crime** rather than deterring it. As a result, reducing incarceration improves not only public safety, but also the health and economic stability of individuals and their communities.

In 2025, we received the results of PFJ's first external evaluation, conducted by Paul Heaton, professor of law and academic director of the Quattrone Center for the Fair Administration of Justice at the University of Pennsylvania. This study found that people supported by Client Advocates in Delaware County, Pennsylvania, experienced a nearly **50% increase in non-conviction outcomes in their legal case, such as dismissal and diversion**. This is the first time that there has been external quantitative validation of PFJ's impact, and we are so excited by the results. We hope additional studies, now underway, will continue to validate our work, particularly in large urban centers like Los Angeles.

Highlights

3,981

TOTAL YEARS RETURNED

4 years and 3 months

RETURNED PER CLIENT

CLIENT STORY

LIGHTNING BUGS AND SECOND CHANCES

Latoya remembers the glow of the lightning bugs and the smell of the honeysuckles. She remembers the familiar creak of her mother's screen door in Mississippi. Those memories became reality again in 2025, when Latoya and her kids made the trip back home from Portland for a family reunion.

They ate well—gumbo, porkchops, fried catfish, and smoked turkey—and enjoyed each other's company. Latoya laughed as her son learned about Mississippi ant nests the hard way, and reminisced with her brothers and sisters.

"This is the first time that I've been home and I didn't drink, I didn't do any of the things I wasn't supposed to," she said, adding that this was also the first time her son had seen his mother and grandmother together.

“

My kids got to see me in a different light on this trip. It was a blessing for them to even trust me and come with me.”

Just a few years ago, a trip like this, with her three children, would have been out of reach. For years, Latoya struggled with substance use. It served as an entry into the criminal legal system, with a DUI in 2019 leading to the loss of employment, loss of housing, and separation from her daughter.

"I ended up lost for about three years and all of the criminal activity, like shoplifting, came from supplying my drug addiction and trying to eat," she said. Life, at that time, was a revolving door of incarceration and the COVID-19 pandemic only complicated matters further, as it made treatment options extremely limited.

In 2023, things came to a head. Latoya was arrested in a stolen car and charged with a DUI. After a few days in jail, she was sentenced to probation with a mandate to stay sober or face nearly five years in prison. But how was she going to comply with the court's demands when she had stumbled before?

That's where Cierra, her PFJ Client Advocate, was able to step in. After her most recent court case, Latoya was referred to work with Cierra, an Advocate at the Metropolitan Public Defender in Multnomah County, Oregon. Together, they worked to build a path toward recovery. Cierra worked with Latoya to switch treatment facilities after discovering that her roommate was still using. She also wrote powerful mitigation, collected letters of support, and helped Latoya comply with the terms of her probation and find stability once she completed treatment.

"Working with Cierra was a matter of me succeeding or failing," Latoya said. Now, Latoya herself works as a case worker—inspired, in part, by Cierra—helping individuals connect with community resources, SNAP benefits, and other critical services. With a renewed sense of purpose and the chance to remain in the community rather than behind bars, Latoya is prioritizing her family, her goals, and the people she serves. In fact, her mom is now coming to visit her in Portland for the first time ever.

“

When I get up in the mornings now, I may want some coffee and I may not want some coffee. My mind is clear. I have grandkids that I have to live for. I have an 11-year-old that sleeps right across the hall from me and likes to sneak into my bed at night. I know that I have to fight for them, but also, I deserve this. I deserve a life free from chaos. I deserve a good life.”



CLIENT ADVOCATE PROGRAM

Our flagship Client Advocate Fellowship Program recruits and trains the next generation of leaders by embedding early-career professionals within public defender offices across the country. Working one-on-one with individuals facing charges, Advocates assist clients with navigating systems and benefits as well as providing specialized mitigation. Seven years into the program, the fellowship has become a pipeline for future changemakers and a proven pathway to the nation's top law schools.

The program's strong reputation was evident in our 2025 recruiting cycle, with over 1,000 applicants for 53 placements.



Highlights

123

CLIENT ADVOCATES

12,537

CASES WORKED

44

ACTIVE PROGRAMS IN 14 STATES

85%

SERVICE PROVISION RATE



TIMELINE

2025

12,537
INDIVIDUALS SERVED

85%
SERVICE PROVISION RATE

2024

9,530
INDIVIDUALS SERVED

80%
SERVICE PROVISION RATE

2023

7,574
INDIVIDUALS SERVED

76%
SERVICE PROVISION RATE

2022

4,184
INDIVIDUALS SERVED

72%
SERVICE PROVISION RATE

RECRUITMENT

6.4%

ACCEPTANCE RATE FOR NEW APPLICANTS TO THE ADVOCATE PROGRAM

60%

OF CLIENT ADVOCATES GO ON TO TOP LAW SCHOOLS AFTER THEIR FELLOWSHIP

CLIENT SUCCESS STORIES



CALIFORNIA: After living in her house for over 60 years, Ms. X had an urgent need for emergency housing after a child protective order was issued. Ms. X felt that she had no choice but to stay in jail until the order was resolved. The Advocate successfully referred her to temporary housing and used PFJ's client fund to provide Ms. X with essentials for her stay there. Ms. X's case was eventually dismissed by the court, and she was able to return home.



DELAWARE: An Advocate was relentless in helping Ms. X and her children find stable housing. After finding a rental that qualified under Section 8, the Advocate negotiated with the landlord and crowdsourced money from community organizations and resources to help Ms. X afford the security deposit.



IOWA: An Advocate wrote a mitigation report for Ms. X, whose involvement in the legal system stemmed from mental health challenges and losing her child in a tragic accident. The mitigation report and letters of support collected by the Advocate convinced the court to suspend her indeterminate prison sentence.



TEXAS: Mr. X is the sole provider for his child and was referred to an Advocate for support in securing vital documents and accessing temporary housing. Together, they secured birth certificates, an apartment lease, and stable employment. The Advocate continues to support Mr. X and help stabilize his life with his child.

WHERE ARE THEY NOW?

With nearly 150 alumni, PFJ Advocates who complete their fellowship go on to pursue a wide array of careers. From some of the nation's top law schools and the halls of Congress, others return to the public defender's office where they worked as an Advocate. But wherever they may end up, our alumni are making incredible change. Here are what a few of them are up to.



Madeleine Gilson, former Advocate at the Alameda County Public Defender's Office in California (2018-2020). Now a post-bar law clerk at the Alameda County Public Defender's Office.

How did your time at PFJ help inform your current path?

I'm back at the same office where I first started as a PFJ Advocate over five years ago! Through being a PFJ Advocate, I learned how much I loved working directly with clients, and began to see my own power to effect meaningful change in my clients' lives.

What is your biggest takeaway from your fellowship with PFJ?

Above all, being an Advocate taught me persistence, creative problem-solving, and resourcefulness. I learned that most things could get done so long as I was determined, built the right relationships, and pursued out-of-the-box ideas. I still use these qualities daily in work and in life.

Is there a client story from your time as an Advocate that still resonates with you today?

One that stands out is a former client who was referred to me to help meet DMV requirements. But the individual told me what they really needed help with was reuniting with their children after being incarcerated. We worked closely together for nearly a year, and at the custody hearing, the judge reunited the individual with their children. They gave me a framed photo of them and their kids that has been on my desk for years. It's a reminder of why I do this work, and that—even when the odds seem slim and the task seems daunting—a determined, community-driven effort can move mountains in our client's lives.



Elizabeth Roka (2022-2024), former Advocate at the New Orleans Public Defender's Office in Louisiana. Now at the Innocence Project.

How did your time at PFJ help inform your current path?

I am currently working under the Director of Special Litigation at the Innocence Project as a paralegal.

What is your biggest takeaway from your fellowship with PFJ?

The emphasis and training on client-centeredness fundamentally shaped how I approach the work I do now.

Is there a client story from your time as an Advocate that still resonates with you today?

Too many to choose from!



Jamir Graham, former Advocate at the Alameda County Public Defender's Office in California (2022-2024). Now a second year law student at UC Davis School of Law.

How did your time at PFJ help inform your current path?

Partners for Justice helped inform my decision in pursuing my current path to be a public defender by working with clients with enmeshed penalties of the criminal legal system.

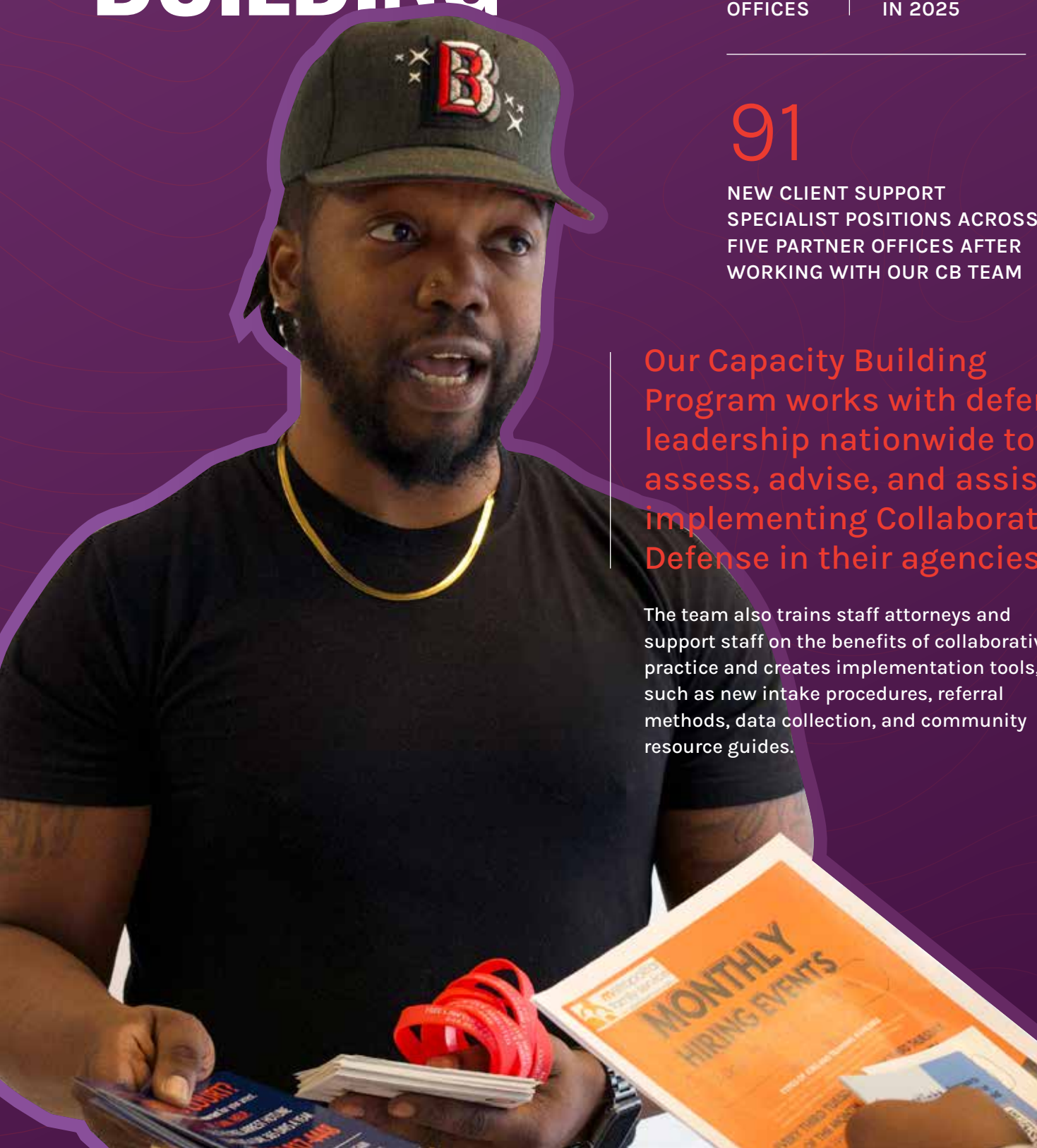
What is your biggest takeaway from your fellowship with PFJ?

The biggest takeaway from my fellowship with PFJ is we can have safer communities by providing housing, employment, and healthcare.

Is there a client story from your time as an Advocate that still resonates with you today?

Being able to sit down at the defense table during trial with a client that was charged with a crime. I was able to get them connected with several resources, have lunch with them, and wipe away tears all the way to receiving a not guilty verdict at the end of the trial.

CAPACITY BUILDING



Highlights

10

ACTIVE PARTNER OFFICES

3

PARTNERSHIPS ESTABLISHED IN 2025

91

NEW CLIENT SUPPORT SPECIALIST POSITIONS ACROSS FIVE PARTNER OFFICES AFTER WORKING WITH OUR CB TEAM

Our Capacity Building Program works with defender leadership nationwide to assess, advise, and assist in implementing Collaborative Defense in their agencies.

The team also trains staff attorneys and support staff on the benefits of collaborative practice and creates implementation tools, such as new intake procedures, referral methods, data collection, and community resource guides.



TOOLKIT LAUNCH

In 2025, PFJ, with support from the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation and the American Bar Endowment, launched the **Collaborative Defense Toolkit**. The toolkit is a free, publicly accessible resource bank that provides materials and strategies to public defenders for incorporating Collaborative Defense into their practices. Our goal is to widely disseminate knowledge and awareness of the benefits of Collaborative Defense and its capacity to transform client experience and case outcomes. Since its launch, the toolkit has reached nearly 1,000 individuals, many in the public defense community.

CASE STUDY: COOK COUNTY

With the opening of two Freedom Defense Centers in the Chicago neighborhoods of Roseland and Austin last year, the geography of public defense is fundamentally shifting. Rather than visiting a public defender in an intimidating courthouse miles away from home, the Freedom Defense Center positions public defenders as an integral part of the neighborhood, equally invested in community safety and success.

The result of over three years of collaboration between PFJ's Capacity Building team, the Cook County Public Defender's Office, as well as local residents and stakeholders, these centers offer more than just case support. In Austin, the Freedom Defense Center is housed among other community organizations in the Aspire Center—a workforce development hub—making everything from therapy to know-your-rights training accessible to the neighborhood.

In Roseland, the stand-alone office is helping revitalize a former commercial hub by drawing the community in for legal workshops and arts programming. With the help of two Client Advocates with deep roots in the community, the Freedom Defense Centers began taking cases this year. As these Centers continue to grow in their impact, they represent a transformation in the relationship between public defense and the people of Cook County.



FAMILY DEFENSE



A criminal case can easily become a parent’s worst nightmare. Arrests tear families apart in acutely traumatic ways—children watching a parent be handcuffed, incarceration stealing years from a child’s life, and criminal protective orders that were never meant to cause long-term separation, but often do. Public defenders are uniquely positioned to prevent family separation owing to their early involvement in criminal legal cases that may lead to separation.

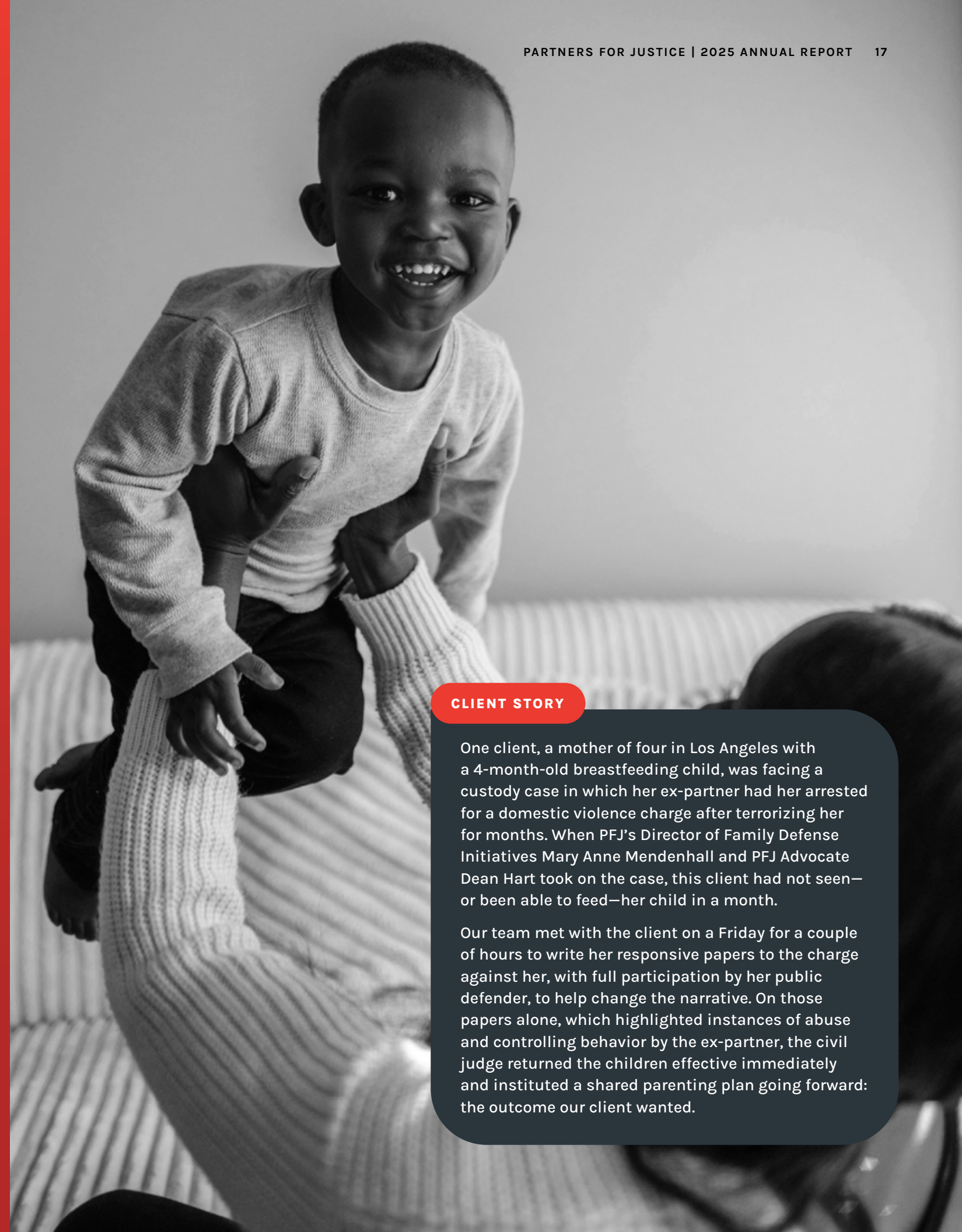
To address this, Partners for Justice launched its Parent Defense Pilot Program in 2024 in collaboration with California’s Office of the State Public Defender. The work occurs on three fronts:

- 1 We train staff attorneys and support staff to understand how criminal legal contact can ripple into a person’s parental rights—consequences that are often invisible until it’s too late.
- 2 We develop practical, easy-to-use guides and resources for attorneys, parents, and other Advocates.
- 3 We offer direct advice and support to public defender clients in California who are facing family separation without family law representation—a gap that often goes unaddressed in the criminal court system.

Highlights

177
FAMILY DEFENSE
REFERRALS IN 2025

12
FAMILY DEFENSE
TRAININGS IN 2025



CLIENT STORY

One client, a mother of four in Los Angeles with a 4-month-old breastfeeding child, was facing a custody case in which her ex-partner had her arrested for a domestic violence charge after terrorizing her for months. When PFJ’s Director of Family Defense Initiatives Mary Anne Mendenhall and PFJ Advocate Dean Hart took on the case, this client had not seen—or been able to feed—her child in a month.





Our team met with the client on a Friday for a couple of hours to write her responsive papers to the charge against her, with full participation by her public defender, to help change the narrative. On those papers alone, which highlighted instances of abuse and controlling behavior by the ex-partner, the civil judge returned the children effective immediately and instituted a shared parenting plan going forward: the outcome our client wanted.



SHAPING DISCOURSE

Transforming public defense—across 50 states and over 3,100 counties—is an audacious goal, and re-imagining a massive public system with deeply entrenched challenges requires influence and support. Last year, we hit some huge milestones, received some incredible honors, and saw our vision conveyed in local, regional, and national media.

MEDIA HIGHLIGHTS

- 
FORMER PFJ ADVOCATE SARAH MARES'S OP-ED IN TEEN VOGUE
- 
STATELINE'S FEATURE ON THE ROLE OF ADVOCATES
- 
OP-ED IN LAW360 ABOUT HOW PUBLIC DEFENDERS CAN SHAPE THE FUTURE
- 
OP-ED IN SALON ON THE HARMS OF CASH BAIL

CLARA SHORTRIDGE FOLTZ AWARD

In November, PFJ received the **Clara Shortridge Foltz Award** from the National Legal Aid & Defender Association. The award recognizes a public defender program or defense delivery system for outstanding achievement in the provision of indigent defense services. We, alongside the Los Angeles County Public Defender, received the award for our long-standing partnership and innovation. Since the collaboration began in 2021, we've placed over 65 Client Advocates who helped defense teams in Los Angeles achieve incredible results, like reducing clients' exposure to potential incarceration by over 920 years in 2024 alone.

Although Clara Shortridge Foltz pioneered the idea of public defense over 100 years ago, we're still working to realize her vision fully. We're still iterating. We're still innovating. And we won't stop.

PFJ LEGACY AWARD

The Los Angeles County Public Defender's Office was awarded the prestigious 2025 Partners for Justice Legacy Award for its groundbreaking, client-led, Collaborative Defense approach. This national honor recognizes defender organizations that set the gold standard in public defense.

The Los Angeles County Public Defender's Office joins a distinguished group of past recipients including the Harris County Public Defender's Office, the Tribal Defenders Office for the Confederated Salish and Kootenai Tribes in Montana, the Delaware Office of Defense Services, and the Alameda County Public Defender's Office.



COLLABORATIVE DEFENSE CONFERENCE

Public defense has the power to transform lives—that was the theme of PFJ’s 2025 Collaborative Defense Conference. Held in San Diego last year, there were a variety of sessions and workshops to uplift the transformative power of public defense, from building trust with youth clients and mitigating the impact of detention on children, to enhancing

Collaborative Defense practice through community engagement. Every year, the conference provides a generative space for Advocates, supervisors, and social service partners from across the country to strengthen ties and share ideas for transforming public defense. With over 200 people attending, this was our largest conference yet.



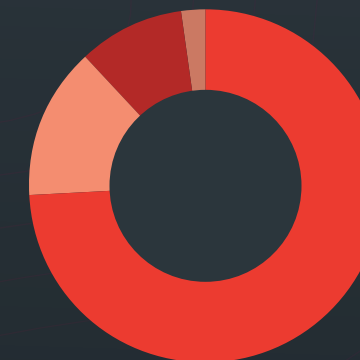
PFJ CHAMPION AWARD

At the conference, we gave the inaugural PFJ Champion Award to Andrew Strong, Deputy Chief Administrative Officer for the Public Safety Group in San Diego County, for his innovation and support of public defenders. We launched the Champion Award in 2025 to elevate public policy leaders who have demonstrated exceptional commitment to investing in public defense and equal justice.

FINANCIAL SNAPSHOT

2025 REVENUE

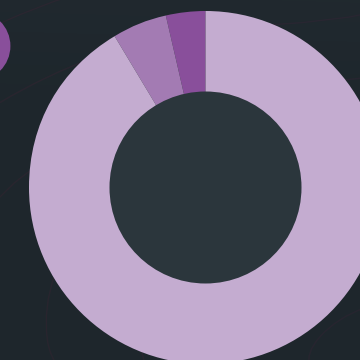
- 74.37% Government
- 13.87% Foundations
- 9.69% Individuals
- 2.07% Other



\$10,554,013
2025 REVENUE TOTAL

2025 EXPENSES

- 91.4% Programs
- 5.2% Fundraising
- 3.4% Management



\$9,480,480
2025 EXPENSES TOTAL

*The revenue and expenses shown are preliminary and unaudited. Final amounts may vary, pending completion of PFJ’s annual independent audit.

For more information about our finances, [CHECK OUT OUR PROFILE ON CANDID](#)



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THANK
YOU