

Nashville Defenders Create a Client & Community Advisory Board

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“Honest and earnest criticism from those whose interests are most nearly touched, – criticism of writers by readers, of government by those governed, of leaders by those led, — this is the soul of democracy and the safeguard of modern society.”

— From *The Souls of Black Folk*, by W.E.B. Dubois

It’s no secret to public defenders that some clients refer to us “Public Pretenders.” There are many reasons for that, including the perception that we are part of an unjust system steamrolling over them, and less-than-real lawyers who are paid by the government to plead our clients guilty the first chance we get. While that is not how most public defenders perceive themselves, we have largely ignored or been indifferent to this disconnect between us and our clients.

As Nashville’s elected Public Defender, the issue began to nag at me a few years ago. How can I accept a status quo in which our clients – the individuals and families we are here to serve – have so little faith and trust in us? Shouldn’t we at least try to understand how the relationship between public defenders and our clients got to this place of distrust, and identify how we contributed to that problem? And once we do that, isn’t it our obligation to work on doing better and repairing that harm?

The answer to those questions for me was a clear yes, and once we started the work, it didn’t take long for us to identify issues we needed to address – with excessive workloads at the top of the list. We also realized that if we truly wanted to know how our client community felt about us, about what we were doing wrong (and right) from a client perspective, we needed to ask them. And we couldn’t be afraid of or defensive about the answers we got. Instead, we really needed to listen to them.

We started these conversations over a year ago through our Defend Nashville Initiative – and received some valuable feedback that is now informing our decisions about how we deliver services. From there, we made the decision to form a Client Advisory Board for the Public Defender’s Office – for which I have to give props to the New York State Defenders Association! They started their Client Advisory Board work in 1979, and in 2013, produced a Manual for Defender Leaders in How to Develop a Public Defense Client Advisory Board. That Manual has been an invaluable tool in helping us start down this path.

Our goals for the Board including providing consistent feedback about office services; serving as a sounding board for office initiatives; and helping design, execute and evaluate office programs, all from a client perspective. While I do not expect the Board will eliminate the disconnect that exists between our client community and ourselves overnight, or even in the near future, my hope is that it will move us in that direction – a direction of better understanding each other, and building a better Public Defender’s Office that is well-respected by everyone in Nashville, and most importantly, by the individuals and communities whose interests are most nearly touched by our advocacy.