

NATIONAL PUBLIC DEFENSE WELL-BEING STUDY



Project Goals

[BeSustained](#), a national nonprofit with the mission of improving access to justice by advancing the well-being of public defenders, is developing the first of its kind national study of well-being in public defense. The findings and recommendations from this project will help support individual defenders, improve the organizations we work in, and inform the systems making budget and policy decisions that impact public defense. The future of public defense requires a community of thriving public defenders who are supported to provide client-centered advocacy, particularly in light of the current challenges that we face. This project will provide an evidence-based path toward this goal. Led by current and former public defenders and well-being thought leaders, this study will generate critical data to help support and sustain public defenders.

Support individual defenders.

Improve work environments.

Inform budget and policy decisions.

The Need for Research

Large and recent studies of lawyer well-being, such as [The Prevalence of Substance Use and Other Mental Health Concerns Among American Attorneys in 2016](#) and the [2024 Attorney Well-Being Report: The Divide Between Health & the Legal Industry](#), have informed the field and fueled investment in well-being in the private legal sector. The [ABA and Krill Strategies](#) are currently collaborating with state bars on a nationwide research update on lawyer well-being.

There is less data on public defense. The groundbreaking 2011 Wisconsin study by Linda Alpert, summarized in [The Toll of Trauma](#), establishes the impacts of trauma exposure on public defenders. Individual states have undertaken studies of public defender well-being, such as the [Kansas State Board of Indigents' Defense Services Well-Being Committee](#) and [An exploratory study of occupational and secondary traumatic stress among a mid-sized public defenders' office](#), but there has been little national research to guide data driven responses to support the well-being of public defenders. As public defenders struggle with the toll of trauma and occupational stress, and organizations struggle to recruit and retain defenders, this research is urgently needed.

Timeline

This project will utilize multiple research methods that are both quantitative and qualitative, with the protection of privacy and scientific methodology.

Phase One will explore the motivation that drives public defenders from recruitment through retention and separation decisions.

Phase Two will make a comprehensive review of occupational variables that impact well-being in public defense. (Dates are approximate.)

PHASE ONE	PHASE TWO
Survey on Passion & Sustainability Fall 2025 – Winter 2025/26	Defender Well-Being Study Spring 2026 – Summer 2026
<ul style="list-style-type: none">Collaboration with a researcher at Harvard Business School, to deepen our understanding of what drives passion, energy and sustainability in public defense work.Survey participation will be voluntary and anonymous. Harvard will have no access to personal identifying information.From 10/20/2025 to 10/31/2025, participants will answer a few short online questions twice a day for two weeks, taking 2-3 minutes per survey.Aggregated survey data will be used to identify key issues impacting well-being in public defense and priorities for additional research during Phase Two.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">Collaboration with a researcher at the University of Utah, designed to survey issues affecting public defender well-being.Survey participation will be voluntary and anonymous. Univ. of Utah will conduct a scientific study with protection of privacy and scientific methodology.One-time in-depth survey conducted in Spring 2026.An online survey should take no more than a total of 10 minutes to answer.The study will focus on a number of occupational domains (i.e., race, gender, age, region) and well-being measures (such as depression, anxiety, substance use, trauma, retention).BeSustained and partner organizations will share findings in a comprehensive report.

Report of Findings

We will issue a report of the findings from each study in order to identify and advance recommended actions to better support well-being of defenders. From recruitment to retention, and maintaining motivation and zealous advocacy throughout our defense careers, we seek to support defenders so they can better serve clients.

The final report will:

- Provide a comprehensive summary of current research on well-being of public defenders.
- Describe the challenges and impacts to well-being for public defenders and their organizations.
- Incorporate quantitative data and qualitative information gathered from the national defender community.
- Describe positive interventions: What do you and your organization need to be successful maintaining your well-being as a public defender?
- Identify recommended actions to better support defenders, and policy and legislative changes.

Seeking Donations and Sponsors

We need your help to make this happen. Staffed by a small but mighty team of volunteers, we are undertaking this study with the goal of shaping public defense to better support defenders. We hope you will consider contributing your time, energy or money to support the future of public defense.



Participation Incentives

Donations of high value incentives to participants who complete surveys (such organizational memberships or conference event passes) that will be randomly distributed to defenders who take time from their busy days to complete these surveys.

Will your organization contribute incentives?



Organizational Sponsors of This Project

These sponsors will have logos featured on materials and final report, and will be thanked in webinars, and invited to co-present webinars at each phase, when findings are released.

Will your organization become a sponsor?



Help Spread the Word

People to assist in sending out the survey registration link to your organizations and lists. Can you share our announcement and link in your emails and newsletters?

Will you send it out within your organization?



Donations of Any Amount

Financial donations of any amount to support this project. You can donate [here](#) (or at BeSustained.org).

Will you donate?

Contact: Jenny Andrews at BeSustained@gmail.com,

BeSustained.org