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National Public Defense Well-Being Study: Part 1

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April 1, 2026

Overview of Talk

Part 1: Who we studied and how

- 353 public defenders across the US; baseline survey + twice-daily diary for 2 weeks + qualitative open-ended responses

Part 2: The good news

- Public defenders are deeply passionate, highly capable, and feel impactful on most days

Part 3: The warning signs

- Overload, exhaustion, exploitation, devaluation, and how bad days reverberate into tomorrow

Part 4: Who is most affected

- Who wants to leave (and why), gender differences, income, career stage, and job role

Part 5: What to do about it

- Five evidence-based implications: reducing overload, managing passion, addressing financial strain, end-of-day satisfaction, and combating devaluation

*The through-line: 82% of defenders who want to leave are still passionate and still feel called. The system is not losing its least committed people. **It is consuming its most dedicated ones.***

Overview of Data Collection

WHO: 353 public defenders from across the US; 76% female, 24% male; average age: 44 years (range: 23-86); average tenure in public defense: 11 years; offices ranging from very small (1-5 people) to very large (100+); Urban (53%) and suburban/rural (47%) settings; most of their time dedicated to criminal defense cases

HOW: A multi-wave study design

- Baseline survey: one-time assessment of traits, attitudes, and demographics (Oct 20-26, 2025)
- Daily diary surveys: twice daily (morning start-of-day + evening end-of-day) for 2 consecutive weeks (Oct 27 - Nov 7, 2025)—yielding over 4,000 individual survey responses
- Follow-up surveys at the end of the 2-week period ($N = 177$) and several weeks later ($N = 145$)
- Qualitative open-ended survey capturing experiences in participants' own words ($N = 87$)

Note: Data collection coincided with the October 2025 government shutdown, which primarily affected federal systems but also created ripple effects for some state-level defenders through disruptions to client benefits (e.g., SNAP) and increased referral demands

Why Multiple Surveys Over Time?

TRADITIONAL APPROACH: A single survey asks people how they "generally" feel

- Useful, but captures only a snapshot—misses the **texture of daily work life**
- Cannot distinguish whether burnout is stable trait of person or reaction to specific daily events

OUR APPROACH: Measuring experiences in real time, twice a day, for two weeks

- Separates "who you are" from "what happened today": can **isolate the effects of daily events** (a hard case, supportive coworker, overwhelming caseload) from stable individual differences
- Enables **stronger causal reasoning**: when we see that a tough evening predicts worse outcomes the next morning—controlling for a person's typical level—gives us confidence the daily experience is driving the outcome, not just that some people tend to feel worse overall
- **Provides actionable specificity**: rather than saying "burnout is high," we can say "on days when overload is above your personal average, exhaustion rises meaningfully the next morning"

In short: this design lets us move beyond describing who is struggling to understanding what makes people struggle—and what helps.



Good News & Warning Signs

The Health of Public Defenders—Good News

Public defenders are deeply committed to this work. A large majority (87%) view their work as a calling:

- Report feeling at least moderate passion on 77% of all days. 84% of people feel passionate on most days, and only 4% never reach moderate passion across the whole study.
- However, 29% have at least one low-passion moment—so while passion is high on average, **nearly a third experience at least one moment where passion nearly disappears.**

Public defenders feel highly capable. Large majority (79%) believe they are good at what they do

- On most evenings (81%), public defenders feel they made a difference. 58% feel impactful on every evening, and only 7% of evenings they do not.
- But 42% dip below the midpoint at least once—**experiencing at least one moment when their confidence wavers.**

Public defenders care deeply about their work, and feel passionately about making an impact on most days:

- "I feel responsibility for all my clients every day, but it isn't a burden. **It's the greatest honor of my lifetime.**"
- "I feel incredibly privileged to have this job, to do this work. **I view the work as service work.**"
- "**I believe I have one of the most important jobs in the world.** Giving hope to people who most need it. Believing in them when they no longer believe in themselves."
- "**I'm the one person trying to keep them from being crushed by the system.** I'm the one person willing to listen to their version of events and try to draw that picture for the prosecutor, judge, or jury."

But Critical Warning Signs Exist: Overload

Many public defenders are overloaded (e.g., “I have too much work to do everything well”). On more than half of all evenings (55%), they report overload. 51% of defenders are overloaded on most days, and **32% report high overload on every single evening they were surveyed** (they never had a day that felt manageable).

- **This is not about working too many hours.** Average workday is 8.2 hours, and only 18% of days involved working 10+ hours. Overload and working hours correlate somewhat but not strongly ($r = .23$), i.e., **overload is not about long hours but more so the felt impossibility of demands** regardless of how many hours you put in.

Many public defenders are also emotionally exhausted. On 65% of all mornings, public defenders wake up feeling burned out, and 64% are exhausted on most days. **38% are exhausted on literally every morning of the study.**

The picture: **extraordinarily dedicated people working in a system that is under-resourced**—and they feel it

- “I have 186 active cases. I don't have time to breathe. I don't make enough money. I don't have enough support. But I am expected to fiercely advocate for my clients. **I WANT to fiercely advocate for them. But the system has made it impossible.**”
- “There were days I was in court until 4 pm on a 9 am docket, because I had 50 people on the docket. Everyone wanted me to do work, and everyone was frustrated that I couldn't, because I was overwhelmed. And then despite working weekends and long days, **I can never do enough.**”

“

I feel like a piece of shit failure. Everything I overlook, I feel it ruins someone's life. Everything I do, I think I could have done better. In my dream life, my inbox is empty and I am ruthlessly organized. In reality, I am under my desk watching Soul Train on YouTube and crying until I pull my shit together.

”



Feeling Devalued and Disconnected

Public defenders feel **exploited and devalued by the system**:

- **72% feel exploited on most days.** On 15% of evenings, they rate exploitation at the **maximum possible** (7 out of 7). And once someone feels exploited, that feeling barely budes from day to day (i.e., very high ICC of .74)
- **74% feel devalued on most days** (e.g., "My contributions are not recognized"), and only 12% never report any feelings of being devalued.
- **About 50% feel at least somewhat devalued and exploited every single evening.** These are not *occasional* bad days—they are chronic experiences embedded in the structure of the work.

Do the poor working conditions lead them to act against their own moral values?

- 49% of all evenings, defenders report "not at all." Moral violations occur rarely (on 14% of all evenings), but more than one third (38%) engaged in one at least once during the two-week study period.
- However, **public defenders witness many moral violations**: Every other evening (49%), they witness things that violate their values, and **a large majority (76%) witness moral violations at least once** during the study period.
- Public defenders almost never personally compromise their values. But **they routinely witness the system violating those same values around them.**

"Every time a human being is put in a cage." "Every. Fucking. Day." "Judges dehumanizing clients, prosecutors lying on the record, police brutality."

“

I have gotten really good at building a shell around myself. But I cried on the phone with a client when I watched a video of him being brutalized by the police. **It's hard to witness these things and keep going** and believing the world is an ok place.

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Passion can become consuming

Passion can be more or less controllable: whether you can put work down when you need to, or whether it follows you home, into your sleep, into the parts of your life that are supposed to be yours. On average, defenders rate their passion as moderately difficult to control (mean = 3.05/6)—and **28% find it hard to control on most days.**

On **1 in 4 days, public defenders experience the “passion paradox”**: highly passionate, but unable to control that passion. That combination is costly—exhaustion nearly 1.5 points higher (4.97 vs. 3.77), work-family conflict nearly double (4.12 vs. 2.46), and meaningfully lower confidence in your own abilities (4.43 vs. 5.22).

"It felt like my brain could not leave my work at home. I would struggle to interact fully with my spouse because I could not stop thinking about work. It felt like I could not control my thoughts."

"I routinely wake up in the middle of the night having remembered something I forgot to do...I will often struggle to get back to sleep due to thinking about all of my other work obligations."

What drives uncontrollable passion? Feeling overcommitted—the sense that you must go beyond what is reasonable. Feeling that demands are threatening rather than manageable. Feeling exploited, devalued, and disconnected from your ideals. And the stakes of the work itself.

"When a person's life and liberty is on the line... depending on the facts of the case, my work can take an emotional toll on me that can last for days. That is when I truly find my passion for work uncontrollable."

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I need to be something more than a public defender. **It has become my identity which isn't healthy.** It negatively impacts most aspects of my life.

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**Bad days don't end when
you leave the office...**

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It felt like **my brain could not leave my work at home**. I would struggle to interact fully with my spouse because I could not stop thinking about work and trying to figure out solutions to the problems my clients were facing. It felt like I could not control my thoughts.

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Role overload strongest predictor of burnout

Overload alone explains **33% of the variance in emotional exhaustion**. The nine largest predictors explain about 50%. That means overload accounts for more than half of the model's explanatory power.

And the dose-response is unambiguous: defenders with low overload report exhaustion of 3.06 out of 7. Those with very high overload—a **third of the sample**—report 5.77. Every step up in overload corresponds to a step up in exhaustion, cynicism, and intentions to leave.

"Tomorrow, I have 22 people on calendar in the afternoon and Thursday 30. It's impossible to support all of them and I hate that."

The daily data makes this even harder to dismiss. On evenings when overload spikes, next-morning exhaustion rises **within the same person, on the same week**. And overload doesn't travel alone: on high-overload days, defenders also feel more exploited ($r = .51$), more disconnected from their ideals ($r = .50$), and less able to make an impact.

"Despite working weekends and long days, I can never do enough."

This matters for how we think about solutions. Passion helps—it's the strongest protective factor in the data. But passion is **half** the strength of overload as a predictor. You cannot passion your way out of an unmanageable caseload. **To address burnout, you have to address the load.**

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In my ideal vision of this work, I have time to advocate for every client zealously. **I have time to work up every case like it's as serious as a heart attack.**

”



Resource inadequacy as core root cause

Nearly **two-thirds** of public defenders rate staffing as inadequate. Only **1 in 30** feels fully resourced across the board. And this isn't just a chronic background condition—on **35% of evenings**, defenders report their daily resources fell short.

Those shortfalls have a predictable cost. On days resources run dry, public defenders experience more overload ($r = -.49$), more exploitation ($r = -.43$), and more exposure to moral harm ($r = -.39$). Across the board, inadequate resources drive emotional exhaustion ($r = -.36$), cynicism ($r = -.27$), and the urge to leave work you care deeply about ($r = -.25$).

"There is simply not enough hours in the day to do my job and do it well... leaving a sense of betrayal for those clients you 'cut corners'."

Under-resourcing doesn't just deplete—it transforms the relationship with the work. Public defenders with adequate resources experience passion as sustaining. Those without them are no less passionate—but **that passion curdles into something consuming and uncontrollable** ($r = -.20$ with obsessive passion).

"The better I do at my job and the more I'm willing to help, the more that is demanded of me... Instead of getting help, we get more cases."

This is not a personal failing. It is a systemic one.

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"I wake up exhausted every day. The toughest days are **when I find out we can't get resources** for a deserving client, arguing with cynical, judgmental, and closed-minded DAs or Judges who don't see the bigger picture. Fighting the gears of a system that can only see punishment and dehumanizes the most marginalized people of our society."

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At risk of losing most dedicated people

42% of public defenders think about leaving at least somewhat often. But the people who want to leave are not the ones who have checked out. Among those with the highest turnover intentions, **82% still feel called to the work**. They are not leaving because they stopped caring.

"My passion has been stamped out by self-preservation."

What is pushing them out? Emotional exhaustion is the single strongest driver—public defenders with high exhaustion report turnover intentions **1.4 points higher** than those without. Cynicism runs close behind ($r = .44$), as does financial strain ($r = .27$). The work extracts most from those who give most.

"I don't think public defenders burn out because they're too passionate. They burn out because they are assigned too many cases."

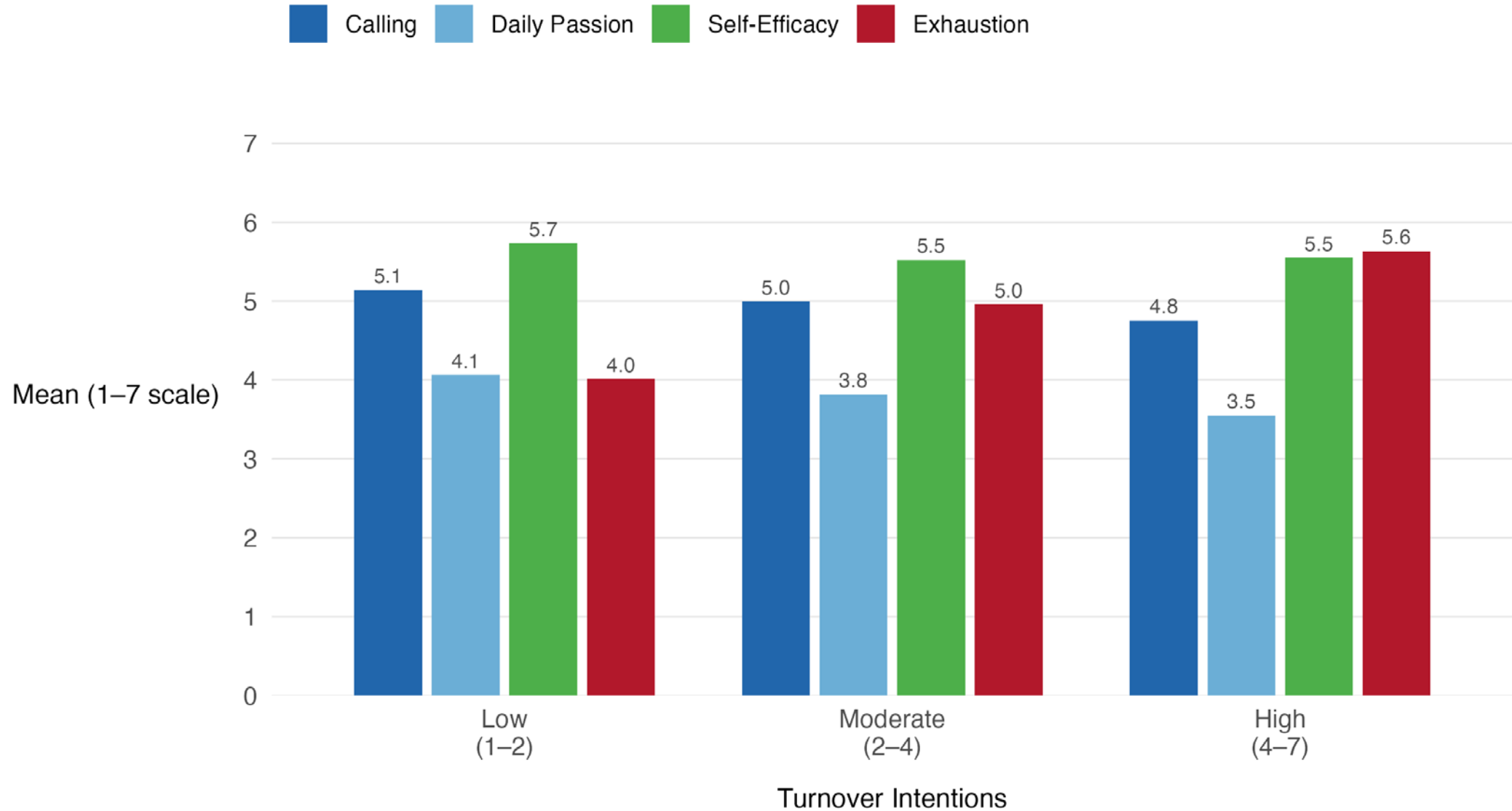
Notably, self-efficacy does *not* predict turnover. Defenders who want to leave report virtually identical confidence (5.55/7) to those committed to staying (5.73). **They know they are good at their jobs.**

"I often weep after court when a client tells me I did a great job — because I know I could have done better, and my hands were forced by the system."

The field is at risk of losing its most exhausted, most sacrificing, most passionate ones.

The System Is Losing Its Most Dedicated People

Public defenders who want to leave are just as passionate, called, and capable — but far more exhausted



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I took a sabbatical rather than quitting at the behest of my Chief Public Defender. But since I've returned, I do not have the same zealous fire burning. **My passion has been stamped out by self-preservation.** There is no one coming to save me, and there is no end in sight of new clients coming on board.

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Who is most affected?

Only small demographic differences

The core finding: exhaustion, exploitation, overload, and passion look essentially the same regardless of geography, office size, caregiving status, or family background. **This is a structural problem, not a demographic one.** Three exceptions are worth noting.

- **Job role** is the strongest demographic factor. **Attorneys are significantly more exhausted** (4.95 vs. 4.40), more overloaded, and feel nearly a full point more exploited on a daily basis than non-attorney staff (4.74 vs. 3.76). The constitutional responsibility falls on them, and the data reflect it.
- **Urban** (vs. suburban/rural) public defenders report higher cynicism (3.90 vs. 3.48)
- **Career stage** reveals a disillusionment valley:
 - Early-career defenders (<5 years) are the most passionate—but also the most exhausted.
 - Mid-career defenders (5–12 years) are the most cynical and most disconnected from their ideals.
 - The most tenured group (12+ years) report the highest self-efficacy and the lowest disconnect, though it is worth asking how much of that is adaptation, and how much is survivorship.
- **Remote work** offers a telling trade-off. Remote workers report significantly less work-family conflict (1.97 vs. 2.89)—the work intrudes less on home life. But they also report lower satisfaction and higher turnover intentions.

Women experience higher toll of work

Financial Difficulty Shapes Intent to Quit

The sample spans a wide income range, from under \$112k (40% of defenders) to over \$225k (31%). And across nearly every dimension that matters, **the daily work experience is statistically indistinguishable between them.**

- A low-income defender and a high-income defender wake up equally exhausted, feel equally overloaded, and experience equal passion for their clients.

But **financial difficulty independently predicts turnover.** 66% of low-income defenders worry about money on most evenings, a real and distinct burden layered on top of the universal strain everyone else is already carrying.

- Low-income defenders are disproportionately **younger, less tenured, and more likely to be women,** the people the field most needs to retain.

Better pay won't fix the work. But for 40% of this workforce, financial stress is quietly pushing them toward the exit on top of everything else.

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It's also assumed that **the relationships I have with clients will keep me hanging on for less pay and benefits.** I work 55+ hours a week with no overtime pay or additional support.

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Five Key Implications for What Needs to Change

What Needs to Change

The five implications below are not a wellness agenda. They are not a list of coping strategies. They are a structural argument grounded in your own experiences for what this system needs to change, and why.

- 1. Reduce caseload overload.** The upstream cause of nearly everything else
- 2. Help people manage their passion.** The problem isn't intensity; it's what the system does to the passion that already exists.
- 3. Address financial strain.** The most actionable and independent lever for keeping people in the profession.
- 4. Invest in sustained support.** Recovery is possible, but the conditions have to exist.
- 5. Recognize contributions and combat devaluation.** Dedication that goes unseen becomes resentment

Implication #1: Reduce Caseload Overload

Why this intervention is necessary: Everything flows from caseload. When defenders carry 130, 350, 500+ cases, the consequences are not just logistical. There is no longer time to read discovery before a court date, to visit a client in jail, to do the work the job actually requires. And when you cannot do the work the way you know it should be done, every other stress multiplies.

How it addresses the root cause: Overload is the upstream cause of the entire burnout cascade. It makes passion uncontrollable. It drives exploitation. When the load is unsustainable, there is no amount of support, recognition, or coping skill that can compensate. You cannot wellness your way out of 500 cases.

What implementing it looks like:

- Enforceable caseload standards with teeth, not aspirations.
- Disproportionate investment in support staff: investigators, paralegals, social workers, and administrative roles that allow attorneys to do what only attorneys can do.
- Structural protection of preparation time (e.g., blocked calendar days, limits on same-day case assignments).
- Within offices, systematic load-balancing so that the most extreme cases of overload are distributed rather than silently absorbed by the most dedicated people.

The goal is not perfection. It is manageability: the difference between a caseload that is hard and one that is impossible.

Implication #2: Help Manage Passion

Why this intervention is necessary: The conventional wisdom about passion in demanding professions is to cultivate it, protect it, reconnect with it when it fades. The data suggests a different problem entirely. Passion is not fading—it is overwhelming people. Unable to stop thinking about cases. Unable to leave the office behind. Unable to be fully present at home. This is what happens when deep caring meets a system that cannot contain it.

How it addresses the root cause: Uncontrollable passion is driven by the same conditions that drive overload: impossible caseloads, disconnection from ideals, exploitation, threat. When the system makes every case feel like a crisis, every moment of caring feels like it could spiral. Addressing controllability means addressing the conditions that make passion feel consuming rather than energizing — and building organizational norms that make it safe to stop.

What implementing it looks like:

- Explicit organizational norms that treat boundary-setting as professional sustainability, not insufficient dedication.
- Leaders modeling what it looks like to leave at a reasonable hour and not answer emails at night.
- Supervisors who ask not just "how is your caseload" but "how is the work feeling — energizing or consuming?"
- End-of-day transition rituals — brief check-outs, planning tomorrow's priorities, intentional closure — that help people shift out of work mode.

The message public defenders need to hear: your passion is not the problem. Protecting it from becoming consuming is not weakness. It is what makes this work sustainable.

Implication #3: Address Financial Strain

Why this intervention is necessary: Financial strain does not change the daily experience of the work. But two-thirds of lower-income defenders worry about money on most evenings. After a day of impossible caseloads, they go home and worry about retirement savings, student loans, whether they can afford to stay. And that worry independently predicts leaving—above and beyond burnout, passion, and every other factor.

How it addresses the root cause: People leave public defense for two reasons: the work breaks them, or they cannot afford to stay. Caseload reform addresses the first. Compensation addresses the second. These are separate mechanisms and both must be taken seriously. The dedication that keeps passionate, skilled people in the profession does not override the reality of financial unsustainability.

What implementing it looks like:

- Concrete advocacy for compensation increases, grounded in the economic argument that turnover is costly and financial strain is a measurable, addressable risk factor.
- Pay parity with prosecutors—not as an abstract principle, but as a dignity issue that shows up in how defenders feel about the value of their work.
- Financial wellness resources, student loan assistance, and benefits improvements in the near term.
- And a clear organizational commitment to stop expecting that passion will substitute for fair pay.

Defenders chose this work knowing it would not make them wealthy. They did not choose to subsidize the system with their financial security.

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The system is structurally understaffed and underfunded. [...] Imagine a doctor without nurses, a television director without the lighting and camera technicians. **The lawyer is the doctor without a billing service and nurses.**

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Implication #4: Making Good Days Count

Why this intervention is necessary: Bad days do not end when defenders leave the office. Evening exploitation follows people home and predicts more exhaustion the next morning. Overload spills over into next-day work-family conflict. This is not inevitable. There is a reset button: Ending the day feeling that the work mattered.

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I often cry in my car in the mornings because it feels physically painful to go into work and drag myself through the day. The cynicism towards wins is new. **I used to feel confident that I made a positive difference** and now I struggle to keep track of that feeling.

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Implication #4: Making Good Days Count

Why this intervention is necessary: Bad days do not end when defenders leave the office. Evening exploitation follows people home and predicts more exhaustion the next morning. Overload spills over into next-day work-family conflict. This is not inevitable. There is a reset button: Ending the day feeling that the work mattered.

How it addresses the root cause: Evening satisfaction predicts less next-morning exhaustion, less cynicism, more passion, and better self-efficacy. But it requires two conditions: that defenders have the opportunity to complete meaningful work on a given day, and that they feel genuinely supported by the people around them.

What implementing it looks like

- End-of-day practices that make impact visible—brief team check-ins where one win, one case moved forward, one client helped is named out loud. Not forced positivity but surfacing the meaning that gets buried under what remains undone.
- Clear organizational policies that protect the transition home: no after-hours emails, explicit on-call rotations, no expectation of weekend availability.
- Sustained support cultures built through peer consultation groups, mentoring relationships, and supervisors trained to be consistently present—not crisis responders who show up when things collapse, but relational anchors who are there every day.

A supportive day does not buffer a terrible one. A supportive culture changes the baseline. That is the level at which this investment must be made.

Implication #5: Recognize Contributions

Why this intervention is necessary: More than half of defenders feel exploited every single evening. It reflects something structural: a system that takes extraordinary dedication for granted. Devaluation compounds it. When defenders feel that their contributions are invisible the work that once felt meaningful begins to feel pointless.

How it addresses the root cause: The exploitation-devaluation pathway is distinct from overload. It is not about having too much work but about doing extraordinary work that goes unseen, uncompensated, and unrewarded. Addressing it requires making the invisible visible: naming what defenders do, what it costs them, and why it matters.

What implementing it looks like:

- Specific, concrete acknowledgment of particular cases and particular efforts—not generic praise, but the kind of recognition that shows someone actually saw what you did.
- Organizational leaders who advocate publicly for the profession's dignity: who push back when defenders are treated as second-class officers of the court, who make the case to legislators and the public that this work is constitutionally essential and professionally demanding.
- Treating exploitation as an organizational health metric (something to be tracked, reported, and acted on) rather than a personal complaint to be managed.

Defenders protect the rights of people the system has already written off. The least the system owes them is to see that clearly, say it out loud, and act accordingly.

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Our data are clear: the system is not losing its least committed people. It is **consuming its most dedicated ones.**

The path forward is not more resilience. It is **structural change that makes this work sustainable.**

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Please reach out if you have further questions! I would love to hear from you.

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