

Alaska Public Defender Agency

Holistic Defense Project

The Holistic Defense Project is a partnership between the Alaska Public Defender Agency and the Alaska Legal Services Corporation with support from the Alaska Mental Health Trust that provides identified beneficiaries with a team of professionals to assist them with social service and legal needs. The Public Defender Agency represents indigent defendants in criminal cases, parents in child welfare cases, and individuals subjected to involuntary commitment for mental health reasons. ALSC offers free civil legal services to low income and disadvantaged people to protect their safety, their health, and promote family stability.

At its core, HDP is a multidisciplinary team of professionals who strive to help clients address the underlying problems and circumstances that brought them into the legal system in the first place. The HDP team begins with the understanding that clients are not a “case” to be processed and closed or a single legal problem to be solved. Rather, they are members of a community and they are people with a history. Holistic Defense clients come with a complicated set of strengths and weaknesses. Those clients come with needs and strengths that are complex and that have developed over time. The HDP team seeks to look at the whole client and to address the broader person by looking at issues such as housing, mental health, food insecurity, medical care, debt, and so on.

As an illustration of the holistic defense perspective is helpful. Imagine a homeless criminal defendant with a severe disability suffering from food insecurity and lack of adequate mental health services. That person might decide to take her criminal case to trial and might well be acquitted by a jury. Yet if she is still homeless and hungry and without mental health services she will likely find herself back in the justice system soon enough. At that point, she might well be worse off for lack of care in the meantime. On the other hand, a holistic defense client might receive additional help getting food stamps, federal disability payments for steady income, access to mental health services, and ongoing contact with the agency social services specialist. Regardless of the outcome of the criminal case, the HDP client will be in a better position overall and less likely to find herself in contact with the justice system in the future. Moreover, if she does come back into “the system,” the HDP team will have an ongoing relationship with her and access to a wealth of knowledge about her giving her another opportunity to improve.

This rather simple philosophy of trying to help people with as many of their needs as possible turns out to pay dividends in long-term outcomes for clients. While it may be a simple philosophy, however, it is not a simple task to implement such a strategy. It requires organization, communication, compassion, drudgery, creativity, and above all a willingness to try and fail and then to try again. In short, it requires a dedicated team.