

ALIJ HOLISTIC DEFENSE PROJECT

THE PROBLEM:

Countless studies show that poverty, substance use, and untreated mental health issues are primary drivers of crime. A recent study locally revealed that just **6%** of people charged with crimes accounted for **21%** of all criminal filings in Allegheny County – evincing the ‘cycling problem,’ where the criminal legal system (CLS) cycles people through without addressing the root causes of why the person entered the CLS in the first place.

In a traditional defense model, the lawyer is defending a ‘case’ rather than a client. The goal is to remove the immediate threat of legal jeopardy, not ameliorate any larger issue. Unfortunately, within these constraints, lawyers seldom work collaboratively with clients to address the issues that drove them into the CLS.

HOW CAN HOLISTIC DEFENSE HELP TO SOLVE THE PROBLEM?

Holistic defense involves interdisciplinary teams made up of attorneys, social workers, investigators, or other advocates who collaborate to address the root causes and consequences of CLS involvement. Research proves that holistic defense **reduces incarceration, saves money, and may reduce recidivism**. Yet today, very few Allegheny County attorneys practice holistic defense.

HOW WILL ALIJ HELP IMPLEMENT HOLISTIC DEFENSE LOCALLY?

The Allegheny Lawyers Initiative for Justice (ALIJ) is a local nonprofit whose mission is to advance criminal justice reform locally. Our current focus is to bring holistic defense to Pittsburgh. To that end, ALIJ created a holistic defense start-up team. Our team includes social workers, criminal law attorneys, and investigators with deep experience working in the local CLS. Our diverse team also includes members who have both been directly impacted by the CLS and have deep ties in our communities that are disproportionately impacted by the CLS. We have spent the last two years meeting with community leaders to discuss the promise of the holistic defense model as one powerful tool to advance reform.

With the generous support of the Heinz Endowments and The Pittsburgh Foundation, we are preparing to launch a ‘demonstration project.’ This will entail collaborating with our allies to provide holistic defense to indigent defendants in a series of cases. We will track data and outcomes with the goal of proving that holistic defense can improve outcomes locally. **We believe that building a sustainable holistic defense model will be a “game-changer” in the region.**