

Defend the Fifth: Quarterly Legislative Report

In June 2025, the Mississippi legislature approved one year of funding for a pilot public defender office in the Fifth Circuit Court District.

Designed to run for at least three years, the pilot brings additional public defense capacity to an under-resourced area. It has the ambitious goal of connecting people with public defenders within 24 hours of arrest. To date, the office's work has contributed to a significant decrease in unnecessary pretrial detention in the Fifth District.

Defending People from Day One

In its first three months of operation, the pilot office represented 44 clients facing felony charges (two of whom were charged with murder) and 30 of whom had associated misdemeanor charges. The office accepted 10 of these clients from other public defenders in the district who had conflicts of interest.

The pilot office:

- Conducted intake interviews with 73 jailed people, all within 24 hours of arrest.
- Filed 67 bail motions on behalf of 59 clients.
- Represented 45 clients at contested preliminary hearings.
- Obtained pretrial release for clients in 50 cases.
- Helped 16 clients enter mental health or substance use treatment programs.
- Resolved 31 cases without a felony conviction, 27 of these at or before preliminary hearing.

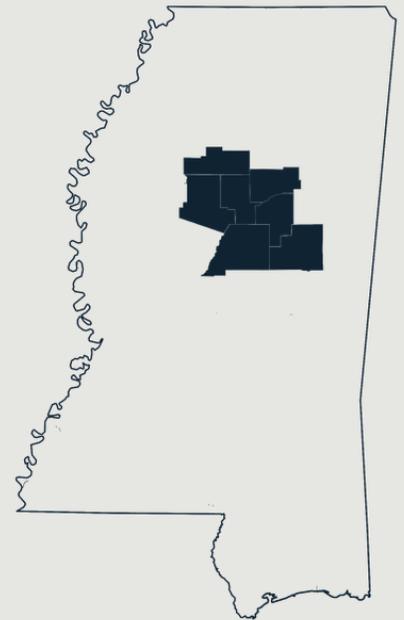
Day One Impact

After his arrest for felony drug possession, Jerry* wanted to turn his life around. His pilot office lawyer immediately knew that Jerry was a strong candidate for drug court. But drug court pleas usually only happen after indictment. With drug lab delays and crowded grand jury schedules, it might take a year or more for prosecutors to indict Jerry's case.

Ordinarily, Jerry would have been stuck in the system, languishing in jail without any treatment. But the pilot lawyer got creative. He asked the prosecutor to let Jerry plead guilty to a 'bill of information' - a less formal, but equally serious, felony charging document. That prompt advocacy changed Jerry's life. Less than 30 days after his arrest, Jerry entered a sober living facility.



Fifth Circuit Court District



Counties include:
Attala, Carroll, Choctaw,
Grenada, Montgomery,
Webster, and Winston

*Data in this document are current
through March 6, 2026.*



Back row (left to right): Victoria S. Lacey, Marlee McBride, Kimm Watson
Front row (left to right): Matthew Darrow, Stephen Wozencraft, Richard Carter, Hunter Salamone

Staff Spotlight: Investigator Kimm Watson



Ms. Watson is a two-time graduate of Jackson State University, where she earned a bachelor's degree in psychology and master's degree in social work. While pursuing her master's degree, Ms. Watson interned with Hinds Behavioral Health Services and the Capital Division of the Office of the State Public Defender. Ms. Watson brings uncommon dedication and expertise to her work at the pilot office. "I chose this work because I have compassion for others, even on their most challenging days. My goal is to uplift, defend, and empower clients, helping them transform their lives beyond the consequences of an arrest."

Board of Directors

Nick Bain is a former legislator and practicing attorney from Alcorn County. Mr. Bain's firm has long provided contract indigent defense services in the First Circuit Court District. He also provides both private and pro bono representation in civil and criminal cases.



Omodare Jupiter is the Federal Public Defender for Mississippi. He previously served as the Public Defender for the U.S. Virgin Islands and in the Northern and Southern Districts of Mississippi. Mr. Jupiter is an active criminal defense litigator and regularly trains defense lawyers across the country.



Forest Thigpen is the Senior Advisor for Empower Mississippi, where he plays a critical role in public policy research and advocacy. He started the Mississippi Center for Public Policy in 1993 and served as its President until 2017. With nearly three decades of public policy experience, Mr. Thigpen is one of the most trusted names at the State Capitol.

