

Defend the Fifth: Three Months of Progress

In June 2025, the Mississippi legislature approved one year of funding for a pilot public defender office in the Fifth Circuit Court District. The office began taking felony cases on October 1, 2025.

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.

Defending People from Day One

In its first three months of operation, the pilot office represented 44 clients facing a total of 58 felony charges (two of which were murders) and 30 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:

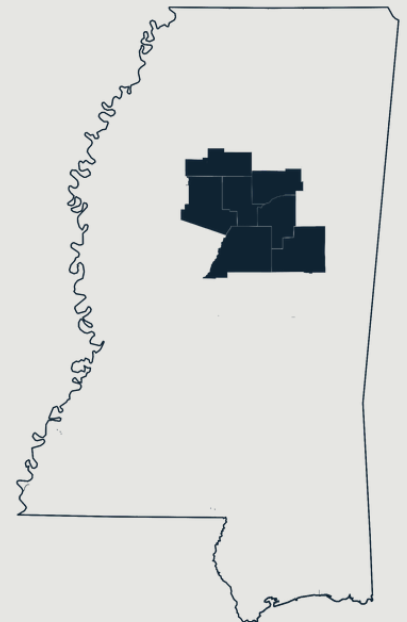
- Conducted intake interviews with 37 incarcerated people within 24 hours of their arrests.
- Represented 13 clients at contested preliminary hearings.
- Filed or argued 32 bail motions for 28 clients.
- Successfully advocated for the pretrial release of 20 people charged with nonviolent felonies.
- Resolved eight cases with favorable dispositions at or before preliminary hearing.
- Persuaded prosecutors to drop all charges against three clients.

Day One Impact

The pilot office represented a man arrested for felony drug possession. Within 24 hours of arrest, a pilot office lawyer began work on the legal case. The lawyer also contacted the client's employer to ensure that the client would be able to return to his job. The office then connected the client with outpatient addiction recovery services. The client remains in treatment after resolving his case with a non-adjudicated misdemeanor.



Fifth Circuit Court District



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

Office of the State
Public Defender

André de Gruy,
State Defender
(601) 576-4290
adegr@ospd.ms.gov

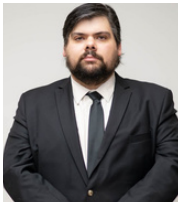
About Defend the Fifth

OSPD contracted with Defend the Fifth Inc, a Mississippi non-profit corporation, to provide Day One public defense services in the Fifth Circuit Court District. The pilot recently moved into a new office on the Kosciusko courthouse square, occupying a previously vacant storefront.

The Staff



Richard Carter brings over 18 years of legal expertise primarily in criminal defense including significant service as a public defender in the Fifth District. He has been recognized as Central Mississippi's Best Lawyer eight times.



Stephen Wozencraft grew up in the district but had been unable to find work close to his hometown. The launch of a full-time pilot public defender office allowed Mr. Wozencraft to return to his community to practice law.



Hunter Salamone is a United States Army veteran. He moved his family north from Hattiesburg to practice in the Fifth District as part of the pilot office.

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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.

