

# Twenty Years After Katrina

“This is not just someone you see in a prison jumpsuit, **this is a person, a real human being** with layers of complications and humanity.”

Danny Engelberg

A Short Bug Podcast

Sept 14, 2025



## Transforming Public Defense in New Orleans

Since Hurricane Katrina, public defense in New Orleans has undergone a profound transformation. What emerged from the storm was not only a rebuilding of physical infrastructure, but a reimagining of how constitutional defense could and should operate in a city shaped by deep inequities, mass incarceration, and community trauma. Orleans Public Defenders (OPD) was created in this context and has since evolved into a nationally recognized client-centered public defense.

This report situates OPD’s work in 2025 within the broader arc of growth and change since Katrina, highlighting how far public defense has come, and the systemic pressures that continue to define the work today.

## Public Defense Before and After Katrina

Before Hurricane Katrina, public defense in New Orleans was unconstitutional, fragmented, and severely under-resourced; fueling an overburdened and highly punitive criminal legal system. There was no consistent structure to provide representation from the point of arrest, nor adequate investigative or social service support for clients. As a result, people accused of crimes routinely faced wrongful convictions and systemic injustice.

Hurricane Katrina exposed and exacerbated these failures. Court closures, lost files, mass displacement, and prolonged pretrial detention

## Press Highlight

### The Redeem Team Radly Balko

March 18, 2025

155 Collective Years  
incarcerated Now they  
counsel others facing their  
own sentences.



underscored the constitutional crisis facing indigent defense in Orleans Parish. In the years that followed, litigation, community advocacy, and national attention created momentum for reform.

The establishment of Orleans Public Defenders marked a decisive shift, from a fragmented appointment system to a unified, institutional public defense office grounded in professional standards, ethical obligations, and accountability.

In the years that followed, litigation, advocacy, and national attention led to the creation of a unified public defender office grounded in professional standards, accountability, and full-time representation.

### Building a Team-Based Defense Model

Since its inception, OPD has intentionally developed a team-based defense model that recognizes that legal outcomes are inseparable from the social, economic, and health-related realities clients face. Chief Defender Danny Engelberg, while sitting down with Ari Shapiro from NPR, described the early years as “a living, breathing experiment, a startup, scrappy group of folks trying to do what seemed at that point insurmountable.” Over time, OPD has:

- Built interdisciplinary teams of attorneys, investigators, social workers, client advocates, and mitigation specialists.
- Integrated trauma-informed and client-centered practices into representation.
- Expanded alternatives-to-incarceration advocacy, bond advocacy, and reentry support.
- Developed specialized units to address mental health, youth defense, serious felony cases, and life-without-parole exposure.

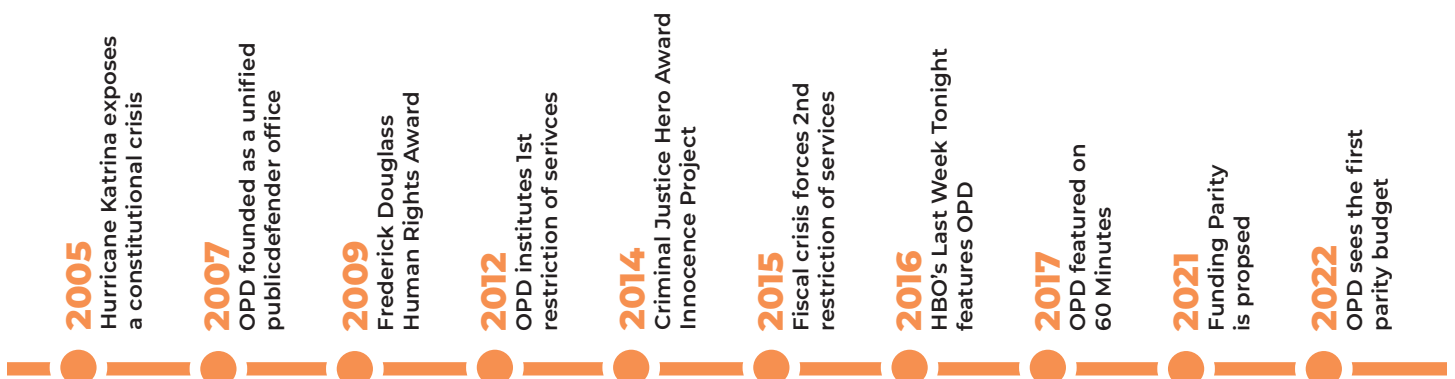
This model reflects lessons learned over two decades: effective public defense improves not only individual case outcomes, but community stability and public safety.

### Growth, Strain, and Systemic Pressure

While OPD has grown significantly since Katrina, that growth has occurred alongside escalating systemic pressures. Legislative changes increasing sentencing exposure, chronic underfunding statewide, workforce burnout, and fluctuating arrest patterns have repeatedly pushed public defense to the brink.

Caseload crises, including periods where OPD was forced to refuse

## OPD Milestones



# 2025 BY THE NUMBERS

All figures presented are current as of publication. Unless otherwise stated, numbers represent Criminal District Court as well as Traffic and Municipal Court.



“The absolute worst place for my clients living with serious mental illness or cognitive impairments is jail. **It is destabilizing. It is dangerous.**”

Barksdale Hortenstine Jr.

The Times Picayune | Nola.com  
Nov 7, 2025

cases to comply with ethical standards, underscored that constitutional defense requires not only commitment, but sustainable investment.

Against this backdrop, parity funding and structural support have become essential, not aspirational, to maintaining a functional justice system.

## Accomplishments in 2025

In 2025, Orleans Public Defenders continued to fulfill its constitutional mandate amid compounding pressures that tested the capacity, sustainability, and resilience of public defense in New Orleans. Public defense is inherently reactionary, and this year required OPD to meet unprecedented demands while remaining steadfast in its commitment to ethical, client-centered representation.

## Scope of Representation

- OPD represented 19,487 people in 2025.
- This accounted for roughly 85% of all cases in Criminal District Court.
- Representation was delivered by a multidisciplinary staff working collaboratively to provide team-based defense.

## Impact of Parity Law

The City’s historic parity law, marked a critical step toward a more balanced and constitutional legal system. While parity alone does not resolve structural challenges, it enabled meaningful progress, including:

- Replacing staff lost to attrition, particularly in major felony and life-without-parole cases, though significant vacancies remain.
- Expanding conflict representation and specialized defense capacity.
- Strengthening alternatives to incarceration in direct response to the jail population crisis.
- Increasing investment in expert witnesses to support rigorous and comprehensive advocacy.
- Scaling up the Client Services Division (CSD).
- Growing mental health and youth-focused representation, including hiring formerly incarcerated staff whose lived experience strengthens client trust and outcomes.

## Press Highlight

### *Hurricane Katrina was a catalyst for change in New Orleans' public defender office*



#### Ari Shapiro NPR | All Things Considered

August 5, 2025

Engelberg worked to convince the city that public defense was more than a constitutional guarantee. It was also a good investment, because locking people up is expensive, and, at times, New Orleans has had the highest incarceration rate in the country.

Many 2025 goals remained adaptive rather than complete, reflecting the volatility of the criminal legal system.

### **Client Services and Community Impact**

OPD's team-based defense model continued to demonstrate that effective public defense is inseparable from community health and public safety.

Through the Client Services Division in 2025:

- 900+ individuals received direct assistance.
- Nearly 3,000 client and case objectives were addressed.
- Clients were connected to critical services addressing mental health needs, substance use disorders, housing instability, and bond advocacy.

This work not only improves individual legal outcomes, but reduces incarceration-related costs and promotes long-term stability for families and communities.

### **Systemic Challenges in 2025**

Throughout 2025, OPD navigated escalating external pressures, including:

- A jail overpopulation crisis, with the population reaching 1,429 people in September 2025.
- Increased arrests following the arrival of Louisiana State Police's Troop NOLA.
- The addition of a third prosecuting entity with the Attorney General's New Orleans team.
- Higher bond amounts, requiring intensified advocacy at first appearances.
- Increased sentencing exposure driven by renewed use of multiple bills, elimination of parole, and changes to good-time eligibility.

These factors compounded workload demands and heightened the stakes of every stage of representation.

### **Looking Ahead: 2026 and Beyond**

As OPD moves into 2026, the office remains focused on strengthening both courtroom advocacy and community relationships. Future priorities include expanding community partnerships, increasing public education about the right to counsel, and continuing to center the voices and experiences of the people most impacted by the criminal legal system.

Now 20 years after Katrina, OPD reflects what sustained advocacy and institutional investment can achieve. As OPD Attorney Meghan Garvey observed, "The system is really night and day... We are representing people seven days a week, even on holidays. We have investigators, we have social workers, and we get to work right away." What began as a small office of part-time defenders has grown into a comprehensive public defense organization, one that continues to pursue justice, dignity, and fairness for the people of New Orleans.