NATIONAL DEFENDER INVESTIGATOR ASSOCIATION
2025 REGIONAL CONFERENCE
Baltimore, MD

"Defend with Purpose: Charm City Champions"

4:00 pm – 6:00 pm	**REGISTRATION (Maryland Suites Foyer)**	***TUESDAY, September 2***
8:00 am – 9:00 am	**REGISTRATION and COFFEE BAR (Harborview)**	***WEDNESDAY, September 3***
9:00 am – 9:15 am	**WELCOME & OPENING REMARKS**	
9:15 am – 10:30 am	**PLENARY**	

How to be an Effective and Ethical Investigator

Marquise Findley-Smith, Assistant Federal Public Defender, Office of the Federal Public Defender for the District of Maryland, Baltimore, MD
Luna Garzón-Montano, Assistant Deputy Public Defender, New Jersey Office of the Public Defender, Newark, NJ
Nate Mensah, Director of the Superior Court Program, Arnold & Porter LLP Washington, DC
Columbia/Frederick/Annapolis

Experienced trial attorneys share their perspective on how to thoroughly investigate a case and get the information they need to zealously and effectively represent our clients. These attorneys will offer guidance on everything from how to conduct the initial case meetings, to appropriate and ethical conduct while working in the community, and beyond. They will share practical advice regarding the 'do's and don'ts,' including their own experiences with investigation in both the pre-trial and post-conviction spaces. This group of presenters will continue to share real-world instructions for ways to maximize the impact of our work in the 101 Workshop Session that will immediately follow.

10:30 am – 10:45 am — **Networking Break, Exhibits**

10:45 am – 12:00 pm — **CONCURRENT SESSIONS**

Understanding and Engaging Youth in the Juvenile Legal System Through Positive Language

Jimmonique Rodgers, PhD, JD, Director of Operations, The Gault Center, Washington, DC
Chesapeake A

Every word we choose shapes the relationship we build with young people—either opening doors or quietly closing them. Inadvertently, we may use language laden with bias, disapproval, and negative judgment that can impact youths' perceptions of themselves – especially Black, Latino/a, and Native/Indigenous youth – and of us. In this session, we'll examine how circumstances, language, tone, and approach influence youth behavior and how we can better understand and interpret that behavior. We'll then address how our unexamined language with young people can reinforce negative outcomes—and offer tools for more intentional, affirming communication to build authentic rapport and approach sensitive or trauma-related topics. Together, we'll practice reframing language, explore affirming alternatives, and reflect on how intentional communication supports more accurate information gathering—and ultimately more just outcomes for our clients.

Defending Veterans in Criminal Cases: A Deeper Dive

Art Cody, Esq., Captain U.S. Navy (Ret.), Director, Center for Veteran Criminal Advocacy, Ridgewood, NJ
Baltimore

Military Veterans undergo an experience far removed from the vast majority of those who sit in judgment of them in the criminal justice system. The military experience, particularly if it involves combat, indelibly shapes the veteran and often has significant causal or mitigating implications. At its core, as mandated by *Porter v. McCollum*, 558 US 30 (2009), the defense team's role and obligation in a veteran's case is to investigate and tell that vet's story -- to translate this uncommon experience into a human narrative that not only engenders the comprehension of a prosecutor, judge, and jury but also evokes their compassion. This practical instruction will assist defense team members by exploring the veteran experience, the "typical" veteran, lawyer-veteran client interaction, acquiring and interpreting military records, interview techniques, and a discussion of an archetypical veteran mitigation brief/sentencing hearing. While covering the basics of veteran representation, it will provide lessons learned from recent veteran criminal cases.

The Investigator's Edge: Open-Source Intelligence in 2025

Joseph Dean, Litigation Technology Paralegal, Federal Community Defender Office for the Eastern District of Pennsylvania, Philadelphia, PA
Carolyn Mehrtens, Capital Defense Investigator, Military Commissions Defense Organization, Washington, DC
Maria Sapene, Chief of Litigation Support, Federal Public Defender, Central District of California, Los Angeles, CA
Chesapeake B

In the ever-changing digital age, looking for online and social media evidence is essential to any criminal defense investigation. This session will cover the latest techniques and tools to help all defender trial teams confidently navigate digital pursuits for useful information in 2025. Participants will learn the latest search engine hacks, AI tools, advanced social media search strategies and resources to enhance your examinations. Investigators, paralegals and other defense team members will receive practical guides, handouts, and a curated collection of OSINT bookmarks to use in their own cases.

New Session Format: 101 Workshop Sessions are geared towards newer investigators, but will highlight best practices and anyone is welcome to attend!

Investigation 101 Workshop One: Understanding Defense Theories and How They Shape Our Work

Marquise Findley-Smith, Assistant Federal Public Defender, Office of the Federal Public Defender for the District of Maryland, Baltimore, MD
Luna Garzón-Montano, Assistant Deputy Public Defender, New Jersey Office of the Public Defender, Newark, NJ
Nate Mensah, Director of the Superior Court Program, Arnold & Porter LLP Washington, DC
Columbia/Frederick/Annapolis

In the first workshop, attendees will review a mock fact pattern and discuss possible defense theories. There will then be a discussion of how to create an investigative to-do list, with the presenters advising on questions they would want asked - both of witnesses and the overall case itself – and will explain what is most helpful to them, as they prepare for trial.

12:00 pm – 1:15 pm — **LUNCH BREAK**

1:15 pm – 2:30 pm — **CONCURRENT SESSIONS**

Verbal De-Escalation

Joshua Jannotti, Chief Investigator, Division of Mental Health Advocacy, New Jersey Office of the Public Defender, Trenton, NJ
Chesapeake A

This session is designed to provide defense team members with practical tools and techniques for verbal de-escalation. Whether engaging with a distraught witness, a hostile client, or a stressed colleague, effective de-escalation can enhance credibility, preserve professional integrity, and increase the likelihood of a successful outcome. As Chief Investigator of the Division of Mental Health Advocacy, and chair of the NJ OPD's Verbal De-Escalation Training Committee, the presenter has spent time collaborating with teammates across several practice areas to develop a training to enhance a defense team member's ability to use effective communication to reduce tension, defuse anger and build rapport. The goal is to transform a potentially volatile encounter into a productive exchange.

Organizing Investigations

Kaylyn Christian, Director of Mitigation, Atlantic Center for Capital Representation, Philadelphia, PA
Baltimore

This session will highlight best practices, in both non-capital and capital cases, for organizing ourselves as we work as mitigation specialists, fact investigators or paralegals. The presenter will share different work products to use to keep track of records, discovery, witness information, and outstanding requests. This session will also include a discussion on the value of high-quality documentation (memos, declarations, affidavits) – which could lead to testimony – and the importance of communicating clearly with the rest of the defense team.

Strategies and Structures for Social Media Investigations

Jennifer Merrigan, Attorney, Phillips Black, Philadelphia, PA
Carolyn Mehrtens, Capital Defense Investigator, Military Commissions Defense Organization, Washington, DC
Chesapeake B

Social media contains a treasure trove of facts you never knew you needed and photos you will never unsee. The key is knowing how and where to look, and how to collect and use your findings. This presentation includes strategies for investigators and paralegals on using social media to investigate individuals and evidence in your case, as well as systems and tools for effectively capturing, cataloging and retrieving the information.

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Investigation 101 Workshop Two: Identification Procedures & Interviewing Preparation

Chris Pipe, Supervisory Investigator, Military Commissions Defense Organization, Washington, DC
Columbia/Frederick/Annapolis

In the second workshop, attendees will learn about proper identification procedures, discuss and role play potential witness scenarios, and prepare for a witness interview. Interview preparation topics will include background research, drafting questions, rapport building techniques, what to bring (or not bring) with you into the community, and more! Assisting Workshop Two will be Alyssa Biederman (Chief Investigator, Delaware County Office of the Public Defender, Media, PA), Seana Holland (Director of Investigations, Levy Firestone Muse LLP, Washington, DC) and Trish Slater (Chief Investigator, Office of the Federal Public Defender for the District of Maryland, Baltimore, MD).

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2:30 pm – 2:45 pm — **Networking Break, Exhibits**

2:45 pm – 4:00 pm — **CONCURRENT SESSIONS**

Investigations Concerning Spanish-Speaking Clients and Witnesses in an Anti-Immigrant Climate

Bruni Marrero, Director of Investigative Services, The Legal Aid Society, New York, NY

Chesapeake A

The key to any defense is the client relationship and the ability to gather information and understand what is being said in the case. This session will discuss the barriers and challenges encountered when having Spanish-speaking clients and witnesses within our criminal legal system, particularly in today's anti-immigrant climate.

Decarceration Investigation: Exploring the Roles of Investigation as a Tool to Fight Mass Incarceration

Olinda Moyd, Former Director of Decarceration and Re-Entry Clinic, American University, Washington College of Law, Washington, DC

Baltimore

This session will highlight the importance of investigation that continues even after a person goes to prison, to include prisoner's rights (conditions cases), resentencing motions and court hearings, parole hearings, and reentry options (designing release plans to present to the court). Investigation after sentencing is critical when getting a client's case back into the courtroom or helping them pursue other avenues to earn their freedom.

Crime Scene to Courtroom: Integrating Legal Insight in Defense Investigations

Jacqueline Cadman, Partner, Brown, Goldstein & Levy LLP, Baltimore, MD
Sean Gordon, Managing Partner, Gordon Chiara LLP, Washington, DC

Chesapeake B

A successful defense begins long before trial—and often at the crime scene. This dynamic session, led by a seasoned criminal defense attorney and a veteran defense investigator, explores how legal strategy and investigative techniques intersect from the moment a case begins. Using real case examples and practical tools, the presenters will highlight how collaborative, legally informed investigations can expose weaknesses in the prosecution's case, strengthen defense outcomes and bridge the gap between fieldwork and courtroom advocacy.

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Investigation 101 Workshop Three: Interviewing / Statement Taking

Chris Pipe, Supervisory Investigator, Military Commissions Defense Organization, Washington, DC

Columbia/Frederick/Annapolis

In the third and final workshop, attendees will learn how to effectively document witness interviews, to include the use of written statements or memos, and a discussion of when, or if, to record.

4:00 pm – 4:15 pm — **Networking Break, Exhibits**

4:15 pm – 5:30 pm — **PLENARY**

Letters from Sing Sing

Dan Slepian, Senior Investigative Producer, NBC News, NY

Columbia/Frederick/Annapolis

In December of 2002, NBC News producer Dan Slepian got a letter from a New York state prison. It was from a man serving 25 years to life for murder. And it ended with a desperate plea: look into my case. Jon-Adrian "JJ" Velazquez had been convicted of killing a retired New York City police officer, but he insisted he didn't do it. Dan was skeptical. Prosecutors said five eyewitnesses had sworn JJ was the killer. Could five people be wrong? So, Dan began to dig. As detailed in the award-winning podcast, *Letters from Sing Sing*, and in the book, *The Sing Sing Files: One Journalist, Six Innocent Men, and a Twenty-Year Fight for Justice*, what he discovered went far beyond just JJ's case.

The film, *The Sing Sing Chronicles*, from MSNBC, recently won best documentary at the 2025 News & Documentary Emmy Awards!

Networking Reception – Pisces (15th Floor)
5:30 pm – 7:00 pm

8:00 am – 9:15 am — **COFFEE BAR (Harborview)** — ***THURSDAY, September 4***

9:10 am – 9:15 am — **DAY 2 OPENING REMARKS**

9:15 am – 10:30 am — **PLENARY**

The Gideon Blueprint: Bringing AI In-House for Public Defense

Rob Thies, Investigator, Federal Public Defender, Eastern District of Missouri. St. Louis, MO

Constellation CD

This is the real story of how one public defender office built its own secure AI system without ever sending client data to the cloud. In this session, we'll walk through the design and deployment of Gideon, a locally hosted large language model now being used for tasks like transcript review, document drafting, and case prep. You'll hear what worked, what failed, and what it actually takes to bring AI into the building in a way that works for real people, real cases, and real risks. Whether you are tech-savvy or just curious, this is your chance to see the blueprint in action.

10:30 am – 10:45 am — **Networking Break, Exhibits**

10:45 am – 12:00 pm — **CONCURRENT SESSIONS**

CV Workshop

Corey Thompson, Training Director, Minnesota Public Defenders, Minneapolis, MN

Chesapeake A

Have you ever noticed that police officers love to talk about their "training and experience"!?! This workshop will discuss the rationale for building a witness's credibility and apply it to criminal defense investigators. You have a lot of training and experience of your own to share. We will identify CV red flags, the elements of a solid CV, and start the process of working up or refreshing your CV. We will also cover some of the credibility building questions that you can expect upon direct examination.

Facing the Algorithm: What Defense Teams Need to Know About AI Generated Police Reports

Rob Thies, Investigator, Federal Public Defender, Eastern District of Missouri. St. Louis, MO

Constellation CD

Police departments are already using AI to write reports, sometimes based on body cam footage, sometimes without a clear author at all. But what does that mean for defense? This session explores emerging tools like Axon Draft One and others that use generative AI to create narratives from raw data. We'll talk about how to identify these reports, how to challenge their reliability, and how to push for the discovery you need. If your work touches anything involving police reports, this session will help you see what's changing and how to get ahead of it.

Mitigation Writing Skill-Building Workshop

Julie Hyman, Manager of Advocacy and Engagement, Social Worker, Investigator and Mitigator (SWIM), Public Defender Association of Pennsylvania, Philadelphia, PA

Chesapeake B

This workshop is meant to strengthen writing skills for mitigation. Participants will learn methods for cohesive narrative building and language choice and then practice shaping client facts in a way that highlights themes and the humanity of our clients for decision-makers.

12:00 pm – 1:15 pm — **LUNCH BREAK**

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1:15 pm – 2:30 pm	CONCURRENT SESSIONS	
Prepare to be Crossed Corey Thompson, Training Director, Minnesota Public Defenders, Minneapolis, MN Chesapeake A Welcome to one of the most stressful moments of your career…the examination of your work in a public setting. This session will review the best practices, and potential pitfalls, for when you are inevitably called to testify as a witness. We will also discuss some of the common tactics used by the state to discredit your testimony. Attorneys are great at prepping our witnesses on substance, but we often glaze over the psychological stress inherent in testifying. We will discuss that pressure here and leave you with healthy decompression tools.	**Navigating Cellebrite Reader (Part I)** Lindsey Lepchitz, Solutions Engineer, Federal Defenders/US Courts & Cellebrite Team Members Eric Hirst, Chief Information Officer, Groom Law Group, Washington, DC Matt Hanna, Supervisory Investigator, Public Defender Service, Washington, DC Constellation CD Ever gotten a cell phone extraction report in discovery, but only in PDF format? What's a UFDR? Did the government give me everything on the cell phone in discovery? Okay, I'm in Cellebrite Reader, where do I find _____? Join us for a hands-on session, two-part session, including a scavenger hunt, on navigating all Cellebrite Reader has to offer in your extraction review. A Cellebrite Reader.exe file and demo .UFDR file will be distributed/accessible prior to these sessions – it is strongly encouraged you have this both ready to go on your own laptop to help enhance the hands-on experience. Discover analytic tactics and solutions that will modernize your investigative workflow process and enable efficiency and collaboration across your agency, including all Cellebrite has to offer from regularly available programs like Cellebrite Reader. *This is a Part I & Part II Session	**Techniques of Persuasion** Philip Becnel, Managing Partner, Dinolt Becnel & Wells Investigative Group LLC, Baltimore, MD Chesapeake B I'm busy. I don't really want to be involved. I didn't really see everything. I don't want to help your client. I already talked to the police. I hate courts. The prosecutor told me I don't have to talk to you… Have you ever wondered why, given all the common objections, witnesses talk to us? This session will cover the psychology of persuasion and how to get interviews when witnesses are otherwise reluctant. We will cover maximizing the effectiveness of your introduction, methods to overcome objections, and questioning techniques to fill in omissions and to elicit more information following evasive responses. We will also touch on the scourge of Ring doorbells and locked apartment buildings, among other societal changes, and how these things impact how we should approach witnesses.
2:30 pm – 2:45 pm	**Networking Break, Exhibits**	
2:45 pm – 4:00 pm	**CONCURRENT SESSIONS**	
Strengthen Your Case with a Life History Records Toolkit Katherine Ashton, Co-Director of Mitigation Casework, Advancing Real Change (ARC), Inc., Baltimore, MD Chesapeake A "Tell me, what will you do with your one wild and precious [hour of the day to collect life history records]? The two principal categories of evidence in any mitigation investigation are witness testimony and written records. Where we all know that client and witness interviews provide meaningful evidence and direction to our investigations, third party contemporaneous written records are the unsung heroes of mitigation. Life history records substantiate our arguments, provide leads to investigate, and fight back against that pesky 'they're just saying all this mushy stuff now as an excuse' skepticism our client's mitigation case so often faces. Whether you're collecting a ton of records every time, or you're only able to collect one record per case, this session aims to help you expand your toolkit for collecting and using life history records. Let's make any valuable time you have to spend on records as efficient and effective as possible.	**Navigating Cellebrite Reader (Part II)** Lindsey Lepchitz, Solutions Engineer, Federal Defenders/US Courts & Cellebrite Team Members Eric Hirst, Chief Information Officer, Groom Law Group, Washington, DC Matt Hanna, Supervisory Investigator, Public Defender Service, Washington, DC Constellation CD See Part I Session Description. *This is a Part I & Part II Session	**eDiscovery on a Shoestring Budget** Joseph Dean, Litigation Technology Paralegal, Federal Community Defender Office for the Eastern District of Pennsylvania, Philadelphia, PA Carolyn Mehrtens, Capital Defense Investigator, Military Commissions Defense Organization, Washington, DC Maria Sapene, Chief of Litigation Support, Federal Public Defender, Central District of California, Los Angeles, CA Chesapeake B This session will provide an introduction to free eDiscovery tools that will help you process, triage, and analyze discovery. This session will cover common file types and free tools you can use to review them, allowing you to overcome common discovery processing challenges.