



**NATIONAL DEFENDER INVESTIGATOR ASSOCIATION
2026 NATIONAL CONFERENCE
New Orleans, LA**



“Defend with Purpose: Best Practices in the Bayou”

4:00 pm – 6:00 pm **Registration / Check-In** **TUESDAY, April 21**

8:00 am – 9:00 am **Registration / Check-In & Coffee Bar** **WEDNESDAY, April 22**

9:00 am – 9:15 am **Welcome and Opening Remarks**

9:15 am – 10:30 am **PLENARY**

Legal Ethics in Defense Work

Kevann Gardner, Founding Partner, [K. Gardner Law](#), Washington, DC
Grand Ballroom

A defense team that is able to zealously and effectively represent a client, while maintaining compliance with all ethical requirements, is critical for success. In this session, you will hear from an investigator turned defense attorney about the ethical rules you need to know (and follow!), in order to maximize results, and ensure ethical standards are met every step of the way.

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

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

<p>Defending Gang, Enterprise, RICO, and VICAR Prosecutions: Evidence Architecture, Expert Challenges, and Mitigation Strategy – Part I Victor Torres, Owner, VMT Investigations, CA Daniel Longoria, Gang Expert, VMT Investigations, CA Grand A/B</p> <p>This workshop presents a historically grounded and practice-oriented framework for analyzing gang, RICO, and VICAR prosecutions. Participants will examine predicate discipline, evidentiary admissibility, expert witness gatekeeping, and structured discovery audits, including cooperating witness disclosures under Brady and Giglio. The program demonstrates how rigorous investigative analysis can identify structural weaknesses in enterprise theories and support mitigation strategies grounded in disciplined proof assessment. The workshop emphasizes methodological rigor and evidentiary reliability rather than advocacy positions, focusing on investigative and analytical standards applicable to complex enterprise prosecutions.</p> <p>This is a two-part session (Part II, Wed. Apr. 22, 1:15-2:30pm).</p>	<p>What Would You Do? Ethics in Investigation Kevann Gardner, Founding Partner, K. Gardner Law, Washington, DC Jordan Crunkleton, Assistant Public Defender, Juvenile Division, Maryland Office of the Public Defender, Annapolis, MD Kelsey Robinson, Assistant Public Defender, Juvenile Division, Maryland Office of the Public Defender, Upper Marlboro, MD Grand C</p> <p>This interactive session will include real-life scenarios that defense team members may encounter in a case at any stage. Defense attorneys will be on hand to talk through best practices and the ethics behind why - and how - we do our work.</p>	<p>Trauma Informed Interviewing – Part I Dana Cook, MSW, Director of Social Services Training and Recruitment, Defender Association of Philadelphia, Philadelphia, PA Grand D</p> <p>In Part I, participants will begin to examine how experiences of trauma—particularly complex trauma—can impact communication, trust, memory, emotional regulation, and stress responses. By reframing behaviors often perceived as resistant or disengaged, practitioners will gain a deeper understanding of the client’s lived experience.</p> <p>This is a two-part session (Part II, Wed. Apr. 22, 1:15-2:30pm).</p>
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12:00 pm – 1:15 pm **Lunch Break**

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

<p>Defending Gang, Enterprise, RICO, and VICAR Prosecutions: Evidence Architecture, Expert Challenges, and Mitigation Strategy – Part II Victor Torres, VMT Investigations, CA Daniel Longoria, Gang Expert, VMT Investigations, CA Grand A/B</p> <p>This session is a continuation of Part I – see Part I session description (Part I, Wed. Apr. 22, 10:45am-12:00pm).</p>	<p>From Discovery Analysis to Strategic Investigation Amber Kaset, Owner/Private Investigator/Mitigation Specialist, AK Investigations, TN & KY Grand C</p> <p>Discovery is not the full story—it is the prosecution’s version of events. This session introduces a structured, repeatable framework for defense team members to systemically analyze the discovery, identify gaps, and organize the information to guide a strategic investigation. Participants will learn how to build organized investigative work product and develop a focused investigation plan by evaluating how the available facts relate to statutory elements and defense objectives.</p>	<p>Trauma Informed Interviewing – Part II Dana Cook, MSW, Director of Social Services Training and Recruitment, Defender Association of Philadelphia, Philadelphia, PA Grand D</p> <p>Part II builds on this foundation by focusing on how to integrate a trauma-informed lens into our interviewing skills. Participants will learn practical strategies for structuring interviews, asking questions, and responding to the client in ways that promote safety, trust, and more effective communication. The session emphasizes actionable techniques to strengthen rapport and support more meaningful, client-centered engagement throughout representation.</p>
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2:30 pm – 2:45 pm **Networking Break, Exhibits**

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

<p>Investigating Sex Assault Cases Jan Fennell, Senior Solutions Specialist, Grand River Solutions, Washington, DC Grand A/B</p> <p>Drawing on her experience as a public defender investigator, public defender, and Title IX investigator and hearing officer, the presenter examines how sexual assault investigations unfold from multiple perspectives within the legal system. The training will begin with practical trauma-informed interviewing techniques and strategies for setting the tone in sensitive investigative interviews. It will then explore how the presenter’s experience as a hearing officer, where she is responsible for making credibility determinations and findings, reshaped the way she approaches investigations. Participants will gain insight into what decision-makers often consider when evaluating credibility and will learn practical strategies for structuring interviews and gathering information in ways that better preserve narratives, clarify timelines, and support thorough case analysis.</p>	<p>Immigration-Informed Investigations Laila Hlass, Associate Professor of Law & Co-Director of the Immigrant Rights Clinic, Tulane University Law School, New Orleans, LA Mary Yanik, Clinical Associate Professor of Law & Co-Director of the Immigrant Rights Clinic, Tulane University Law School, New Orleans, LA Grand C</p> <p>This session will first orient to the immigration legal system by explaining the hierarchy of immigration statuses and the roles of various agencies with authority over immigrants. Then presenters will review the current immigration enforcement landscape and discuss immigrant vulnerability and fears. The session will explore responses to these vulnerabilities and fears, applying trauma-informed strategies to the unique context of working in immigrant communities. Presenters will close by reviewing tools and resources for immigrant community members.</p>	<p>Best Practices: Interviewing Chris Pipe, Supervisory Investigator, Military Commissions Defense Organization, Washington, DC Grand D</p> <p>Witness interviews, and the preparation that goes into them, are both complex and critically important. Attendees will learn about proper identification procedures, how to effectively prepare, and discuss and role play potential scenarios. Interview preparation topics will include background research, drafting questions, rapport building techniques, what to bring (or not bring) with you, and a discussion of when, or if, to record.</p> <p>Part of the ongoing NDIA Best Practices series, which runs virtually and at our national/regional conferences.</p>
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4:00 pm – 4:15 pm **Networking Break, Exhibits**

4:15 pm – 5:30 pm **CONCURRENT SESSIONS**

<p>Storytelling in Death Penalty Cases Heather Holmes, Ph.D., Forensic Psychologist, Principal Consultant, Psychological Consultants, Fort Lauderdale, FL Grand A/B</p> <p>Death penalty cases are unique in that a defendant’s history, along with certain statutory considerations, are presented to a jury after a verdict. Attendees will learn the importance of obtaining particular records, what specific records are helpful to experts, and how they help lend credibility to an expert’s</p>	<p>From Posts to Proof: Advanced Social Media Investigations Carolyn Mehrtens, Capital Defense Investigator, Military Commissions Defense Organization, Washington, DC Grand C</p> <p>In 2026, the rapidly evolving digital landscape makes identifying and preserving online and social media evidence essential to effective criminal defense investigations. This session equips investigators and paralegals with modern strategies and tools to confidently navigate digital</p>	<p>Building Your Own Private Investigations Practice Amber Kaset, Owner/Private Investigator/Mitigation Specialist, AK Investigations, TN & KY Katari Lundy, Private Investigator, Good Faith Investigations, Painesville, OH Lauren VonWiegen, Private Investigator, VonWiegen Investigations, Washington, DC Grand D</p>
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“Defend with Purpose: Best Practices in the Bayou”

<p>findings. Two case examples will be utilized to show how a client's history can impact a jury's decision between life and death.</p>	<p>investigations and uncover critical evidence. Participants will explore advanced search methodologies, emerging AI-driven tools, and refined social media investigation techniques that go beyond basic queries to reveal deeper, often overlooked information. The session will also place a strong emphasis on best practices for capturing, authenticating, and preserving online content—such as websites, social media posts, and metadata—in a forensically sound manner that supports admissibility in court. Attendees will leave with practical resources, including workflows, checklists, and curated OSINT tools they can seamlessly incorporate into their investigative practice and toolkit.</p>	<p>What does it take to leave a public defender office and start your own independent business? In this panel, former public defender investigators share how they successfully made the transition; discussing when to make the leap, how to find and retain clients, and ways to establish credibility in a competitive field. They'll also highlight what you can do while still in a public defender office to prepare, such as developing transferable skills, strengthening professional networks, and building a reputation that will follow you into private work. Designed for investigators considering going out on their own, this session offers practical guidance and candid insight into building a sustainable practice beyond the public defender's office.</p>
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8:00 am – 9:25 am **Coffee Bar / Opening Remarks (9:25 am)** **THURSDAY, April 23**

9:30 am – 10:45 am **PLENARY**

Nothing Less Than the Dignity of Man: Local Lessons on Fighting Forced Labor in Angola Prison's Plantation Fields
(Voice of the Experience vs. James LeBlanc, or VOTE V LeBlanc, MDLA, NO. 23-01304)
Michael Allen, Civil Staff Attorney, [Promise of Justice Initiative](#), New Orleans, LA
Samantha Pourciau, Senior Civil Staff Attorney, [Promise of Justice Initiative](#), New Orleans, LA
Grand Ballroom

Angola Prison (also known as the Louisiana State Penitentiary) forces almost every new arrival to their facility to labor in the fields of their 18,00-acre prison for several months without pay on what is known as the “Farm Line.” The grounds of Angola Prison are former slave plantations, and the men—mostly Black—forced to work the fields are aware of its history. In this presentation, attorneys from the local Promise of Justice Initiative talk about the class-action lawsuit they filed on behalf of Voice of the Experienced and individual men at Angola against Angola Prison for operating this “Farm Line.” While the 13th amendment exception clause permits slavery for those that have been duly convicted, the lawsuit advances a novel legal theory that the *simulation* of chattel slavery in the fields is cruel and unusual punishment under the 8th amendment. The lawsuit additionally advances claims related to the physical dangerousness of the forced labor in the high heat of Louisiana's summers. Attendees will learn about the lawsuit, from its conception and initial filing in September 2023 to its bench trial that concluded in February of this year. The parties are awaiting a ruling from the District Court.

10:45 am – 11:00 am **Networking Break, Exhibits**

11:00 am – 12:15 pm **CONCURRENT SESSIONS**

<p>Cellular Records: Acquisition & Interpretation Joseph Sierra, Director, Forensic Services, Cornerstone Discovery, Philadelphia, PA Grand A/B</p> <p>A real-world guide to how cellular networks function and the different types of records that can be leveraged in investigations. We will break down complex concepts while providing practical insights for identifying users and vital location data. The session also highlights the critical legal steps for properly obtaining and preserving these records. Ultimately, it equips professionals with the knowledge to confidently interpret and acquire cellular evidence.</p>	<p>Child Witnesses in Criminal Investigations: Strategies and Techniques for Investigators Jordan Crunkleton, Assistant Public Defender, Juvenile Division, Maryland Office of the Public Defender, Annapolis, MD Kelsey Robinson, Assistant Public Defender, Juvenile Division, Maryland Office of the Public Defender, Upper Marlboro, MD Grand C</p> <p>Working with children—whether as witnesses, clients, or sources of mitigating information—can pose a unique set of challenges that require a special approach to case investigation. This session focuses on understanding and managing these challenges. During this session, we will discuss the nuances of working with child witnesses, provide tips and tricks for interviewing children both as adverse and defense-friendly witnesses, and work through different approaches to working with child clients in the juvenile and adult criminal legal systems.</p>	<p>Veteran and Special Circumstances Representation Nick Place, Staff Attorney, Partnership for Civil Justice Fund, New Orleans, LA Grand D</p> <p>The presenter, a Marine veteran and former public defender, will give an introductory overview of occupational culture and common experiences among servicemembers, then survey potential issues in representing veteran clients. Defense teams benefit not only from the familiarity of the veteran's experiences, but also a window into how that veteran's loved ones and community have responded to, and been affected, by that veteran's experiences. The presenter's focus will be on “Global War on Terror”-era veterans, but also on pre-9/11 and post-2016 veterans and their unique experiences. Veteran clients also have a host of collateral considerations, including additional plea and resolution options not available to other clients. It will not be a comprehensive covering of all possible system-involved veterans' issues, but it will give investigators and defense teams the tools to ask the right questions.</p>
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12:15 pm – 1:30 pm **Lunch Break**

1:30 pm – 2:45 pm **CONCURRENT SESSIONS**

<p>Cellular Records: A Deeper Analysis Joseph Sierra, Director, Forensic Services, Cornerstone Discovery, Philadelphia, PA Grand A/B</p> <p>A deeper dive into record analysis, moving beyond fundamentals to reveal how experts interpret, map, and validate mobile activity in real-world investigations. We also discuss plotting techniques and critical strategies meant to focus on accuracy, verification, and defensible methodology to bridge the gap between raw data and meaningful insight.</p>	<p>Every Life Has Layers Lela Hubbard, Private Practitioner, Donelson Enterprises, Jackson, MS Grand C</p> <p>“No one's life can be captured in a single document—because every person we represent is layered with experiences, trauma, resilience, and untold stories.” This is an in-depth and practical presentation designed to transform how we approach records gathering. While often viewed as routine or tedious, records collection is one of the most critical tools in developing a complete and accurate picture of our clients' lives. The presentation will cover key steps in the records collection process, including how to make effective requests, strategies for in-person collection, and best practices for maintaining organized and thorough records logs. Participants will also gain insight into thinking outside the box to uncover information that may not exist in written form but is equally vital.</p>	<p>Navigating Cellebrite: Reader & Guardian Matt Goeckel, Technical Marketing Director, Cellebrite Lindsey Lepchitz, Solutions Engineer, Federal Defenders/US Courts Danielle Reilly, Account Executive, Federal Defenders/US Courts Grand D</p> <p>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 a Cellebrite report, where do I find ____? Join us for a Cellebrite Reader overview then a hands-on session on navigating Cellebrite Guardian, a cloud-based share/review platform that streamlines UFDR review. Access to Cellebrite Guardian will be distributed/accessible in the beginning of the session - the only thing you need is a computer and internet access. 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 and Cellebrite Guardian.</p> <p>There is a repeat session Fri. Apr. 24, 10:45am-12:00pm.</p>
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2:45 pm – 3:00 pm **Networking Break, Exhibits**



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3:00 pm – 4:30 pm

KEYNOTE

Bone Valley

Gilbert King, Author, Brooklyn, NY
Grand Ballroom

Mr. King is the author of *Bone Valley: A True Story of Injustice and Redemption in the Heart of Florida*, and the host and producer of *Bone Valley*, a groundbreaking podcast series that takes listeners on an investigative journey through the swamps and courtrooms of Florida in search of truth and justice in the wrongful conviction of Leo Schofield. Mr. King is also the author of *Devil in the Grove*, which was awarded the Pulitzer Prize for general nonfiction in 2013 and has written about race, civil rights, and the death penalty for the New York Times, the Washington Post, and The Atlantic.

@gilbertkingpics and www.gilbertking.com

**President’s Reception
Grand Ballroom Gallery & Balcony
4:30 pm – 6:30 pm**

8:30 am – 9:15 am

Coffee Bar / Opening Remarks (9:10 am)

FRIDAY, April 24

9:15 am – 10:30 am

PLENARY

Best Practices: OSINT and Social Media Investigation

Seana Holland, Director of Investigations, Levy Firestone Muse LLP, Washington, DC
Carolyn Mehrtens, Capital Defense Investigator, Military Commissions Defense Organization, Washington, DC
Grand Ballroom

As more states are adding ethical rules that require online investigation, it is essential for defense teams to know how to efficiently conduct this type of research and effectively use it in court, all while adhering to professional standards. Online and social media research can be a powerful tool for investigators, paralegals and mitigation specialists working on both fact and mitigation investigations, providing critical evidence, context and leads that may not be available through traditional sources. This presentation will outline the framework for preparing to thoroughly conduct an online investigation, tools for identifying witnesses and evidence in your case, strategies for effectively preserving the information, and approaches for strengthening internal defense team communication around investigative findings and case strategy.

Part of the ongoing NDIA Best Practices series, which runs virtually and at our national/regional conferences.

10:30 am – 10:45 am

Networking Break, Exhibits

10:45 am – 12:00 pm

CONCURRENT SESSIONS

Best Practices: Scene Investigation

Lauren VonWiegen, Director of Investigations and Internship Supervisor, Georgetown University Law Center, Washington, DC
Chris Pipe, Supervisory Investigator, Military Commissions Defense Organization, Washington, DC
Grand A/B

Defense investigators spend countless hours at the scene and knowing how to conduct an effective scene investigation is essential, for both investigation and mitigation purposes. This session will focus on best practices and techniques to maximize results; from photographing and measuring to canvassing and collecting evidence, we will cover every you need to know.

Part of the ongoing NDIA Best Practices series, which runs virtually and at our national/regional conferences.

Choosing the Right Voice: Meaning, Selection, and Strategy

Lela Hubbard, Private Practitioner, Donelson Enterprises, Jackson, MS
Grand C

This session explores the critical role of Defense Victim Outreach (DVO) in mitigation work and the intentional process required to do it well. At its core, DVO is about creating space for the victim’s family to be heard—ensuring their voices are acknowledged with respect, care, and purpose within the broader context of advocacy. This presentation provides a clear understanding of what DVO means and why it matters, while emphasizing that not every situation—and not every person—is the right fit for this sensitive role. Participants will learn how to thoughtfully select a DVO representative and explore strategies for introducing the concept to clients, addressing concerns, and building the trust necessary for meaningful engagement.

Navigating Cellebrite: Reader & Guardian

Matt Goeckel, Technical Marketing Director, Cellebrite
Lindsey Lepchitz, Solutions Engineer, Federal Defenders/US Courts
Danielle Reilly, Account Executive, Federal Defenders/US Courts
Grand D

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 a Cellebrite report, where do I find ____? Join us for a Cellebrite Reader overview then a hands-on session on navigating Cellebrite Guardian, a cloud-based share/review platform that streamlines UFDR review. Access to Cellebrite Guardian will be distributed/accessible in the beginning of the session - the only thing you need is a computer and internet access. 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 and Cellebrite Guardian.

This is a repeat session from Thu. Apr. 23, 1:30-2:45pm.

12:00 pm

CONFERENCE END