

A Guide for Building Data Capacity in Rural Defense Systems

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Partners

The **California Office of the State Public Defender** (OSPD) advocates zealously for the underrepresented, particularly those facing capital sentences, while empowering the broader defense community to ensure effective and equitable representation for all. OSPD's Indigent Defense Division works collaboratively with stakeholders to support, train, and build capacity for public defense systems in California.

The **National Institute for Criminal Justice Reform** (NICJR) works to reduce incarceration and violence, improve the outcomes of system-involved youth and adults, and increase the capacity and expertise of the organizations that serve these individuals. NICJR provides technical assistance, consulting, research, organizational development, and advocacy in the fields of juvenile and criminal justice, youth development, and violence reduction. NICJR works with an array of organizations, including government agencies, nonprofit organizations, and philanthropic foundations.

The **Center for Justice Innovation** (Center) is a nonprofit organization dedicated to advancing community safety and racial justice. Since 1996, we've worked alongside communities, courts, and those most directly affected by the justice system to build stronger, healthier, and more equitable neighborhoods. Backed by decades of on-the-ground experience and nationally recognized expertise, we bring innovative, practical, and lasting solutions to justice systems and communities nationwide.

Executive Summary

Robust data capacity supports rural defense systems in improving indigent defense delivery, advocating for the appropriate resources, fostering collaboration with stakeholders, and responding more effectively to legal and policy changes. Yet, rural defense systems face unique challenges, including limited funding, the common use of a decentralized contract-based systems, a lack of technical staff, and resistance to data sharing. These constraints not only hinder effective representation and collaboration across the legal system, but they also hamper the defense system's ability to expand its data capacity.

Drawing on experience providing expert assistance projects in three rural jurisdictions seeking to expand their data capacity and interviews with eight organizations that have successfully built data systems, this guide offers recommendations for building sustainable data systems that considers the unique challenges facing rural jurisdictions. Below is a summary of the five recommendations presented in this guide:

Recommendations

1. Identify Data Capacity Leads

- a. Appoint a defense representative to lead data initiatives, foster collaboration, and oversee data collection and use.
- b. Ensure data-related responsibilities and compensation are built into their role.

2. Build Stakeholder Buy-In Through Shared Goals

- a. Highlight benefits for defense attorneys, system leadership, and external stakeholders (e.g., efficiency, reduced liability, resource planning).

- b.** Align defense and stakeholder priorities to foster buy-in and support for data systems, particularly in jurisdictions with limited resources.

3. Adopt a Sustainable, Universal Data Tracking System

- a.** Select a data tracking system that strikes a balance between manageable administrative workload and tangible defense system benefits.
- b.** Design the data tracking system to facilitate more accurate data entry while supporting defense operations.

4. Identify Critical Metrics and Establish Tracking Practices

- a.** Prioritize essential data (e.g., caseloads, outcomes, attorney efforts) and integrate feeds from partner agencies to minimize workload.
- b.** Ensure systems are capable of summarizing or exporting data for analysis and reporting.

5. Implement an Effective Rollout and Support Ongoing Use

- a.** Begin with a pilot phase, thoroughly train attorneys, and establish feedback channels.
- b.** Conduct periodic data audits, celebrate early successes, and foster a data-driven culture focused on collaboration and improvement.

Data is a crucial pillar in providing effective counsel. It can generate insights, inform defense operations, and assist with policy planning responsive to local needs. The process of building data infrastructure tailored to rural defense systems requires unique and careful planning.

Introduction

Despite having lower crime rates, rural jurisdictions across the nation have higher incarceration rates than their more populous counterparts; one potential driver for this disparity is the lack of resources and investment in public defense (Kang-Brown and Subramanian 2017). The landmark decision in *Gideon v. Wainwright* ruled that the Sixth Amendment guarantees a constitutional right to counsel to all indigent defendants. Rural jurisdictions, which frequently do not have institutional public defender offices, face particular challenges in ensuring effective representation for all. Many rural counties rely on contracts with private attorneys to deliver this constitutionally mandated representation. These contract structures provide little oversight or support to ensure that defense counsel can and do provide effective representation.

Enhanced data capacity and infrastructure across defense systems provide one mechanism for improving the efficacy of representation (Wright and Peeples 2017). In line with rapid developments in technology across the criminal legal system, the American Bar Association (ABA) updated its standards for defense systems in 2023 to include data collection:

- **Data Collection and Transparency (Principle 4)**
To ensure proper funding and compliance with these Principles, states should, in a manner consistent with protecting client confidentiality, collect reliable data on public defense, regularly review

such data, and implement necessary improvements. Public Defense Providers should collect reliable data on caseloads and workloads, as well as data on major case events, use of investigators, experts, social workers and other support services, case outcomes, and all monetary expenditures. Public Defense Providers should also collect demographic data on lawyers and other employees. Providers should also seek to collect demographic data from their clients to ensure they are meeting the needs of a diverse clientele. Aggregated data should be shared with other relevant entities and made publicly available in accordance with best practices (American Bar Association 2023).

Having robust data systems positions the defense to more effectively adhere to several ABA principles foundational to effective counsel, including:

- **Funding, Structure, and Oversight (Principle 2)**
Data systems tracking billing, hours, case volume, and the use of ancillary support can be used to accurately estimate and advocate for the resources needed to represent different case compositions effectively.
- **Control of Workloads (Principle 3)**
Monitor active caseloads that distinguish between case complexity and workloads to ensure defense attorneys have sufficient time to prepare their cases and effectively represent clients.

- **Experience, Training, and Supervision (Principle 7)**
Supervising attorneys can provide feedback to newer attorneys on areas where performance can improve based on the data.
- **Essential Components of Effective Representation (Principle 9)**
Case management systems can facilitate the requests and tracking of assistance from investigators, social workers, mitigation specialists, and other specialized professionals that support public defense.
- **Allow Defense Systems to Operate as Legal System Partner (Principle 10)**
Allow defense systems to operate as legal system partners. Defense leaders can use data to generate insights into the legal system and inform future policy planning grounded in objective data.

These ABA principles highlight the integral relationship between data and defense systems' ability to deliver effective counsel, but actual practice often falls short. Across other high-stakes professions (e.g., aviation, healthcare, education), data collection and analysis are ingrained into practice; through government regulation and the threat of lawsuits, these fields operate under strong structural incentives to minimize risk, reduce errors, and improve outcomes (Metzger and Ferguson 2015). Across adjacent domains in the criminal legal system, from policing to sentencing, data is a crucial driver of policy improvements; indeed, CJI and NICJR extensively use data to inform work in areas such as pretrial services and gun violence.

Our respective organizations echo the ABA's perspective on the importance of data to effective defense function. Drawing from the documented impact of data to drive other criminal legal system improvements, the need for more robust defense data systems designed to collect, store, analyze and apply data to support and improve defense services is evident. Still, the defense faces unique challenges that can make it difficult to develop sustainable data systems. First, defense organizations are chronically underfunded and often lack basic technology. Second, even if resources are present, defense attorneys operate within an adversarial system, and stakeholders may resist sharing data due to the specialized function of the defense. Third, defense culture may be resistant to the idea of data systems used for oversight (Metzger and Ferguson 2015).

These challenges to building data capacity are magnified in rural jurisdictions. Rural jurisdictions often employ a contract or panel defense system in which attorneys operate on their own or have individual contracts with the county (Davies and Clark 2019; Spangenberg and Beeman 1995). Such systems can create a leadership void when defense attorneys have no contractual responsibilities to monitor and improve the overall defense system. The lack of resource parity between defense and prosecutors can lead to policy and operational decisions for the criminal legal system that skew in favor of the prosecution, particularly when prosecutors can more effectively leverage data to steer these decisions (Wright 2004). Some courtrooms lack basic infrastructure, such as internet access, and defense systems often

have limited access to technology (Metzger and Ferguson 2015). In addition, rural jurisdictions are often considered “legal deserts” where it is frequently not only difficult to recruit and retain attorneys, but also challenging to hire ancillary staff, including IT or more technical personnel crucial to building data infrastructure (Pruitt and Colgan 2010; Pruitt, Sherman, and Schwartz 2025).

This document provides guidance to rural jurisdictions on how to develop their defense systems’ data infrastructure and capacity to support the delivery of effective defense services. The following sections describe the information used to inform the guide before outlining recommendations to establish robust data capacity using examples from the field.

Methodology

This guide draws from themes and findings from two main information sources: 1) expert assistance teams consisting of researchers and practitioners from the Center for Justice Innovation, the National Institute of Criminal Justice Reform, and the California Office of the State Public Defender working with three rural jurisdictions in California seeking to expand data capacity for their defense systems in 2025, and 2) interviews with representatives from defense offices and other client-serving public agencies in 2024 that have embarked on efforts to integrate data collection and analysis into their work.

- Across the three sites where we provided expert assistance, we interviewed 24 stakeholders, including heads of defense, defense attorneys, county administrators,

county counsel, IT administrators, judges, court administrators, board of supervisors, and district attorneys. Through these interviews, we sought to gain a deeper understanding of their local landscape and goals. Subsequently, we conducted visits across the three sites, meeting with a range of stakeholders to identify pathways for building data capacity that aligned with their goals while accounting for their specific challenges and limitations. Using this information, we developed individualized roadmaps for each county. All three of these jurisdictions began the process with essentially no data collection infrastructure. By the end of the project, each jurisdiction elected to pursue different paths toward enhancing data capacity.

- During interviews with leaders of eight organizations that have implemented robust data systems, we asked questions about their underlying motivation for developing data systems, how data is utilized, what data elements are collected, how they secured buy-in and compliance, challenges, factors to consider for a case management system, and special considerations for jurisdictions with fewer resources. These interviews were conducted prior to providing expert assistance in the three sites and informed how we supported the three sites.

These two complementary data sources provide a well-rounded perspective on the development of data infrastructure, from planning to implementation, while simultaneously

highlighting the unique challenges faced by rural defense systems. Across these interviews, we examined common themes related to the process of establishing data-driven culture. Drawing from these two sources, we also present several brief, tangible examples of how jurisdictions approached the process of improving data capacity.

Below, we present recommendations for building robust data capacity, recognizing that jurisdictions face different constraints and may be at varying stages in developing their data capacity. At the start of our engagement with the three sites receiving expert assistance, our initial goal was to provide guidance on what metrics to collect and how to process and analyze the collected data. However, the rural sites' lack of a basic foundation for data capacity required us to pivot quickly. Stakeholders initially struggled to conceptualize how data could even be utilized to improve defense delivery and to benefit the counties. As such, Recommendations 1 through 3, which focus on initiating data capacity development, are heavily informed by our work with the three sites. Recommendations 4 and 5 primarily draw from interviews with defense offices and client-serving public agencies that have successfully integrated data into their work.

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Recommendations For Building Data Capacity

RECOMMENDATION #1

Identify data capacity expansion leads.

The process of initiating and securing buy-in for investments in data infrastructure requires selecting a lead representative who understands the defense landscape and can foster collaboration across system stakeholders. In addition to acting as the lead defense representative, they should be able to coordinate tasks across stakeholder agencies, liaise with outside vendors, conceptualize how actionable data can be collected, and plan for long-term sustainability. At this juncture, the defense system may face two challenges: 1) the county may not have a clear leader or defense representative, or 2) the defense leader has subject matter expertise but lacks the technical expertise for implementing technology.

For jurisdictions with public defender programs or managed assigned counsel programs, the chief defender or head defense administrator is the natural person to spearhead efforts. But for contract and panel systems without a designated lead attorney, developing data capacity is outside the scope of responsibilities for individual, contracted defense attorneys. To successfully move data efforts forward, jurisdictions must build out a defense delivery structure that includes a defense leader, even if this defense lead coordinates a panel of independently contracted attorneys. The employment agreement or contract for this defense lead must explicitly include responsibilities related to data development, collection, and implementation,

and the defense lead must be compensated for these additional responsibilities. Critically, hiring or contracting with a designated defense lead yields benefits beyond building data capacity. In line with the ABA's Principle 10 ("Public Defense as Legal System Partners"), this attorney can also serve as an essential defense voice in legal stakeholder meetings, allowing for greater collaboration and the development of policies and practices that improve overall system efficiency and efficacy (American Bar Association 2023).

EXAMPLES FROM THE FIELD

One county operates under a contract system with multiple attorneys who independently manage their caseloads, but they do not have the bandwidth or contractual obligation to work on anything beyond their assigned cases. County stakeholders want to improve the efficacy of the defense system, reduce the use of incarceration, and mitigate the risk of excessive spikes in defense workloads. These stakeholders recognize that many of these goals necessitate access to data and a defense leader who can effectively utilize this data to inform planning and action around these challenges. After presenting to the local Board of Supervisors, the stakeholders received approval to search for funding streams to support the creation of a new chief defender position, to be employed by the county. As stakeholders identify funding streams to establish this new position, they are also developing chief defender job duties that explicitly include stewarding data capacity development and then utilizing data to inform defense oversight/administration.

For jurisdictions that already have a defense leader but face challenges related to technical capacity, identifying a project lead who possesses technical expertise is critical. This project lead should work closely with the defense leader to guide the development of data infrastructure, ensuring it meets the business requirements of the defense. In

addition to being directly responsive to the defense leader, this person should also be able to coordinate with key county and court personnel on issues related to contracts, financial determinations, and court data.

RECOMMENDATION #2

Build stakeholder buy-in for a robust data system through the identification of shared goals.

Once a defense lead has been identified, they should identify the motivations and goals that will be used to get stakeholder buy-in for investment in data capacity. The defense lead may want to take a multi-pronged approach and identify benefits relevant to stakeholders at various levels of the legal system.

Individual Defense Attorneys

When defense attorneys carry heavy workloads and use paper systems, it can be difficult for defense attorneys to conceptualize how data can support them. Further, attorneys may be worried about the additional administrative burden of data reporting and increased oversight. Conversations with defense attorneys can explore concrete ways in which defense data and/or an electronic case management system (CMS) can support their day-to-day work.

For example, a CMS can help attorneys more efficiently organize case files, balance caseloads, streamline requests for ancillary supports, and facilitate e-discovery. It can also store commonly used documents and

serve as a central repository for items like communal motions banks. Importantly, the aggregated data from such a system can be used to advocate for policies and resources that support individual attorneys' work and enhance their ability to secure better outcomes for their clients.

EXAMPLES FROM THE FIELD

Defense attorneys in one jurisdiction struggle to divert mental health cases and are unable to identify key points in the process where opportunities for diversion are missed. To address this, they plan to collect data on mental health diversion referrals, their acceptance rates, and outcomes. They hope to identify bottlenecks in the process to increase diversion rates.

Defense System

Systematically and consistently collected data and resultant numbers provide credibility to defense leads' policy positions. Data around caseloads, attorney efforts, and—in some cases—outcomes is critical to defense leaders' ability to effectively advocate for appropriate resources and supports. Having more accessible data may also ease the burden of responding to external reporting requirements for defense leaders.

Internally, defense leads can utilize data to improve defense operations and oversight. Data can help to manage billing, caseloads, and conflicts, but also to identify areas of strength and need among defense attorneys, allowing for targeted supports and training, as well as more appropriate case assignments. In some cases, a CMS with limited but appropriate integration with other system stakeholders can increase communication—for instance, current custodial status of clients or client contact with pretrial services.

Legal System Stakeholders

Given the scarce resources in rural jurisdictions, finding shared goals and motivations with other legal system stakeholders is among the most crucial driver for securing buy-in. In the three expert assistance sites, the plan for building data capacity always involved collaboration from at least one other legal system stakeholder beyond the defense (e.g., county administrators, prosecutors, courts).

Other legal system stakeholders have interests in improved oversight and accountability to ensure the overall quality of defense service delivery and to mitigate county liability related to claims of ineffective assistance of counsel which can lead to costly lawsuits. These other stakeholders also have an interest in “right-sizing” their defense system and ensuring value for the investment in defense; aggregate defense data provides the county with more information to appropriately allocate resources.

EXAMPLES FROM THE FIELD

One county faces a limited supply of qualified attorneys and ancillary staff. If the system experiences turnover or sees an increase in serious cases, it creates a spike in attorney workload, raising county liability. Moreover, out-of-contract requests create costly budget shocks for the county. The defense system envisions using a CMS to address these risks and facilitate the development of a deeper roster of attorneys in a few ways. First, with case information electronically centralized, the defense lead can more easily review the work of new defense attorneys and provide constructive feedback. In addition, the defense lead can incrementally assign more serious/complex cases to foster attorney growth while monitoring workload balance across the panel. Finally, it can help the defense system track the use of ancillary staff resources to inform future recruitment and budgeting.

A CMS and appropriately-integrated data system can deliver shared cost savings and economies of scale across system actors. The defense and other legal system stakeholders can mutually benefit from a shared data landscape, resulting in improved communication and coordination and allowing for more effective legal system functioning. Parties can make decisions based on the same data and statistics, allowing their discussion to remain focused and grounded in reality. For example, it can be easier to design eligibility criteria for a diversion program when all parties understand the size of the target population and their risk levels. Stakeholders can make decisions based on a broader set of cases rather than heavily weighing information from anecdotal or outlier cases.

EXAMPLES FROM THE FIELD

With the rise in digital evidence and body-worn camera footage, the process of securely transferring information across parties is resource-intensive. It requires scarce staff time to ensure timely discovery. Seeking a more efficient e-discovery process, the district attorney led efforts to secure funding for CMS for both the prosecution and the defense. In this county, courts are primarily focused on court efficiency, and the adoption of the CMS could lead to external benefits if quicker discovery reduced case continuances. Identifying these mutually beneficial positions creates the foundation for jurisdictions to build out their data infrastructure with support from multiple parties. The defense will be able to use the CMS and corresponding data to improve various defense functions beyond a more efficient e-discovery process. But this feature, which is beneficial for the entire legal system, was crucial to pushing buy-in for data capacity investments over the line.

Identifying these multiple and often aligned motivations, defense leads will ideally be able to persuade the county to invest in data infrastructure by leaning into the county’s

values and data's universal benefits across system actors.

RECOMMENDATION #3

Adopt a sustainable, universal defense data tracking system that minimizes administrative burden on individual defenders.

For contract and panel systems, the most sustainable approach is adopting a contract with a CMS vendor that is directly funded by the county and administered by the defense lead. Individual defense attorneys' contracts and pay should reflect any additional work required to engage with and input data into the county-provided data infrastructure.

With higher levels of decentralization common in rural jurisdictions, individual contract attorneys have little to no incentive to invest in a CMS or other data system. Not surprisingly, without a way to translate data into a collective benefit for the defense, investments in data tend to fall by the wayside. Across the three sites receiving expert assistance, most attorneys opted against using a case management system or paying for IT security requirements that would provide them with an electronic read-only access to court records. It did not make sense for them to make these investments when they had other competing needs (e.g., health insurance, support staff, their income).

In situations where the defense cannot secure county funding for a universal defense CMS, they should consider using a standardized

data tracking spreadsheet at the case level. Ideally, this spreadsheet would integrate data from the courts and/or the prosecution. This option presents challenges to maintaining data quality and imposes a greater administrative burden, but it also provides an opportunity to build data fluency among attorneys and demonstrate the value of data to the county and its stakeholders. This approach might provide a foundation for a future transition to a CMS.

EXAMPLES FROM THE FIELD

In one county, the courts have a case management system that tracks common data elements, which could be leveraged into a direct data feed with the defense or used to export data extracts. However, the courts operate in a siloed manner and are unwilling to share data with the defense or the district attorney's office. Given this limitation, the defense requested that the district attorney's office share some high-level case data, including case numbers, assigned defense attorneys, charges, and dispositions. The district attorney's office indicated a willingness to share data based on maintaining the integrity of the legal system and seeking to put pressure on the courts to share data with both their office and the defense. The defense, which does not have funding for a CMS, plans to use monthly/quarterly extracts to build a data tracking spreadsheet that limits data entry to fields not captured by the DA and information more pertinent to defense work. Because contract attorneys have no legal obligation to track data, securing buy-in requires making the data-related workload as manageable and beneficial as possible.

RECOMMENDATION #4

Identify metrics critical for assessing the defense system and the previously identified goals. Build out corresponding data tracking practices.

Selecting Appropriate

Metrics Any data collection infrastructure needs to strike a balance between administrative workload and data comprehensiveness. At a minimum, tracked metrics should enable the defense lead to ensure an appropriate workload and case distribution based on attorney experience. They should be able to review attorney efforts and identify any performance deficiencies. In addition, they should be able to analyze the universe of cases over any specified temporal period, broken down by any combination of the metrics listed in the case attributes and case outcomes sections of the table below.

The list is not exhaustive, and selected metrics should reflect how cases are processed within their respective jurisdiction, relying on local subject-matter expertise.

DATA ELEMENTS TO COLLECT AND THEIR PURPOSE

DOMAIN	DATA ELEMENTS	PURPOSE AND CONSIDERATIONS
Essential baseline data elements for 1) monitoring and managing caseloads across attorneys, 2) reviewing attorney effort and performance, and 3) advocating for the appropriate resources and policy planning. Generally, these data elements should be prioritized for data collection.		
Case Attributes	• Adult/juvenile • Client demographics • Assigned attorney • Offense level (e.g., felony, misdemeanor) • Charges and enhancement (e.g., robbery, assault, mandatory minimum, life sentence enhancement) • Open/pending/closed	Provide contextual information that makes it easier for the defense lead to analyze and interpret case outcomes (e.g., an attorney has longer average sentences because they are assigned more serious cases).

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Case Outcomes	● Pretrial release and bail amounts ● Case disposition (e.g., dismissal, acquittal, guilty plea, guilty, open plea) ● Method of case disposition (e.g., plea, jury trial) ● Sentence ● Alternative processing	Reflect the different ways that defense attorneys can secure more favorable outcomes for their clients.
The value of other data elements may be dependent on the jurisdiction and its priorities. Many of the data elements for case attributes and case outcomes above may already be collected by other legal system stakeholders. Building a direct one-way data feed with these other agencies will free up attorney time to collect separate data elements more pertinent to improving defense delivery.		
Attorney Effort Examples	● Client contact and in-custody visits ● Motions filed and motion success rate ● Requests for ancillary support (e.g., investigators, social workers, behavioral health specialists) ● Hours billed for specific activities	Measures of attorney efforts or data elements used to inform policies should reflect local practices. These measures can provide more details on attorney performance or be used to advocate/plan for policy improvements. The defense lead should assess whether the benefits of collecting these data elements outweigh the administrative workload.
Policy-Focused Examples	● Pretrial risk assessment scores; pretrial decisions (e.g., are pretrial decisions systematically more onerous than recommendation based on pretrial risk assessment) ● Courtroom, judges, and prosecutors associated with the case (e.g., disparities in decision-making based on who makes decisions) ● Diversion referrals; diversion acceptance rate for eligible cases	

For a more extensive list of data elements, refer to the National Legal Aid & Defender Association's [data toolkit](#) and the set of high-level [measures](#) from Justice Counts.

Data System Considerations

If the defense lead decides to pursue a CMS, they should select a CMS that can fulfill their business requirements. Some common requirements of defense data systems are listed in the table below.

DATA SYSTEM FEATURES AND CONSIDERATIONS

FEATURE	PURPOSE AND CONSIDERATION
Direct one-way data feeds from other legal system stakeholders	Building a direct one-way data feed from other legal system stakeholders to ensure all stakeholders work with common information and reduce administrative burden and costs (e.g., defense CMS is auto-populated with charge information and court listings shared through a data feed from the courts). Data shared across legal system stakeholders should be common information (e.g., charges, case disposition) or information that does not conflict with each stakeholder's main function. The defense will have its own data and retain discretion on how to use it or whether it benefits them to share with other stakeholders.
Tracker for ancillary support requests and usage	Tracking the time and use of ancillary staff informs future budget and resource allocation.
Data exporting or the ability to set up reports	A CMS can foster collaboration while also generating insights into trends, performance, and outcomes. 1. The CMS should be able to query and export data into a usable format, such as a CSV or Excel file. 2. Data organized with one row per case is easier to collapse/aggregate and analyze; individuals with multiple cases or charges can lead to duplicative information across multiple rows in such a case-level data arrangement. A CMS can set-up rules to process duplicative information. 3. The ability to extract data expands the pool of technical staff who can support the defense in accessing, analyzing, and using the data. That is, extracted data can be shared with those beyond the defense attorneys (data may need to be de-identified for these purposes). This flexibility is crucial for long-term sustainability in rural jurisdictions, where individuals often assume multiple responsibilities and engage in high levels of collaboration.
Differentiated Access	The defense lead should have administrative access across all cases and restrict individual attorneys to their assigned cases. Providing appropriately differentiated access to effectively oversee the system and avoid creating conflicts. Defense lead should be able to adjust the user setup at any time.
Electronic File Management	Electronic features can save personnel time and address logistical challenges such as an e-discovery feature that allows for the electronic transfer of discovery material versus physically passing along material.

For a more comprehensive set of CMS considerations, refer to an [example](#) from the New York State Office of Legal Services, which outlines the questions considered when deciding to adopt a case management system.

EXAMPLES FROM THE FIELD

In one rural county, the case management system has one direct feed with the courts to pull in relevant court dates and other court records and another direct feed with the district attorney's office to pull in charges and witness information. This system draws upon common information that should be legally accessible to all parties, reducing redundant data entry and facilitating smoother legal system operations.

For jurisdictions unable to engage with a full CMS, any standardized data tracking spreadsheet should leverage existing data from legal system partners to reduce administrative burden and secure buy-in from defense attorneys. In addition, trackers should implement data validation measures to facilitate more accurate data entry, such as drop-down menus with set values; rules and parameters limiting the types of data that can be entered, reinforced through automated error messages and instructions; and auto-population of some fields based on existing values, using preset formulas.

RECOMMENDATION #5**Engage in a well thought-out and effective initial data system implementation.**

Those implementing data systems should expect that they will be adapted and upgraded over time, but an effective initial rollout is crucial for securing buy-in and establishing strong data management habits. Poor data entry and record management can hinder the data system, leading stakeholders to distrust the data and creating a negative cycle where less care is invested in the data quality.

Several strategies can help facilitate a successful rollout.

Roll out new systems incrementally during a test period.

Identify more data-savvy defense attorneys to test the system and identify challenges, then determine fixes prior to rolling new systems out to a broader group. Attorneys with experience across various case types will have perspectives on how a CMS aligns with different workflows.

Train attorneys.

Attorneys should receive sufficient training and have access to technical support when needed. Ongoing booster trainings can keep attorneys up to date on the best data practices and any new developments with the data system. Attorneys should be given clear guidance on data reporting requirements and understand the purpose of data collection.

Establish a feedback channel for all contracted attorneys.

Any lessons or troubleshooting learned from a cohort can be extended to the following group of defense attorneys. Establishing a channel for defense attorneys to provide feedback on what should be analyzed and collected can also be beneficial.

Conduct periodic audits.

Data quality should be periodically tested with real-time feedback provided to defense attorneys engaging with the system.

Encourage a data-driven culture.

Attorneys should be empowered to identify and collect data that they believe can drive systematic improvements in the defense. Leaders should encourage data disclosure focused on systematic improvement rather than discipline (Metzger and Ferguson 2015).

EXAMPLES FROM THE FIELD

Established sites took multiple approaches to ensuring a successful rollout of their data systems, including providing data training during attorneys' onboarding process, organizing frequent meetings to share struggles and brainstorm solutions, reiterating the goal of data and helping attorneys understand the underlying purpose of data collection, and creating a mentorship program.

Share successes with defense attorneys.

When data-related successes occur, sharing these victories with defense attorney reiterates the importance of the work and care they put into the data system. Consistent communication cultivates buy-in and empowers defense attorneys to more actively engage in data.

Conclusion

Adopting a meaningful defense data system requires upfront investment and substantial planning. Rural jurisdictions are particularly challenged in building data capacity due to limited resources and defense delivery structures that often lack leadership and oversight. Effective data tracking practices, however, can improve the quality and capacity of defense systems by monitoring attorney efforts and quality of representation, documenting the need for ancillary supports and resources that can reduce incarceration, and improv-

ing system-wide coordination and efficacy. Building defense data capacity positions counties to ensure effective investment in high-quality defense services while mitigating liability. Expanding defense data capacity not only results in better defense representation, but it also equips jurisdictions to better coordinate across system stakeholders to effectively respond to new legislation, reforms, and developments in the criminal legal landscape. Conclusion

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