

# From St. Louis to Rolla

Social workers within the Missouri State Public Defender system

Photographs by Ellie Frysztak



After graduating with my bachelor's degree in 2019, I moved to Kansas City to work as an investigator for the Missouri Public Defender system until the summer of 2023. My job was often three in one: civil investigator, legal assistant and social worker. I helped coordinate with attorneys and clients to help bond out of custody, help find addiction treatment, get mental health treatment, find housing plans and more. I was not trained in social work and made many mistakes along the way. I often felt inadequate, never being able to dedicate my full 40 hours of time and energy a week to helping clients beyond investigation.

My time as a self-described “part-time, untrained social worker” is the inspiration for this photo book. After years of demand and planning, a new wing of the Missouri Public Defender system, “Holistic Defense Services”, debuted in July of 2022. The goal of the unit is to staff every office with social workers dedicated to working full time on helping clients outside of the courtroom - in the same way I was never able to do.

Brittney Rowe is the mitigation specialist at the Rolla office. Her office covers six counties in central Missouri while her job as a social worker covers 13, ranging from Maries to Ozark County. At any one time she has around 70 clients who need her services. Rachel Lewis is a social worker in the St. Louis office, where she covers just the city limits but has just as much on her plate.

This book has Rowe and Lewis' work at the center, but it includes the clients they have helped and the work they do outside of the confines of the job.



## Rachel Lewis - St. Louis, Mo

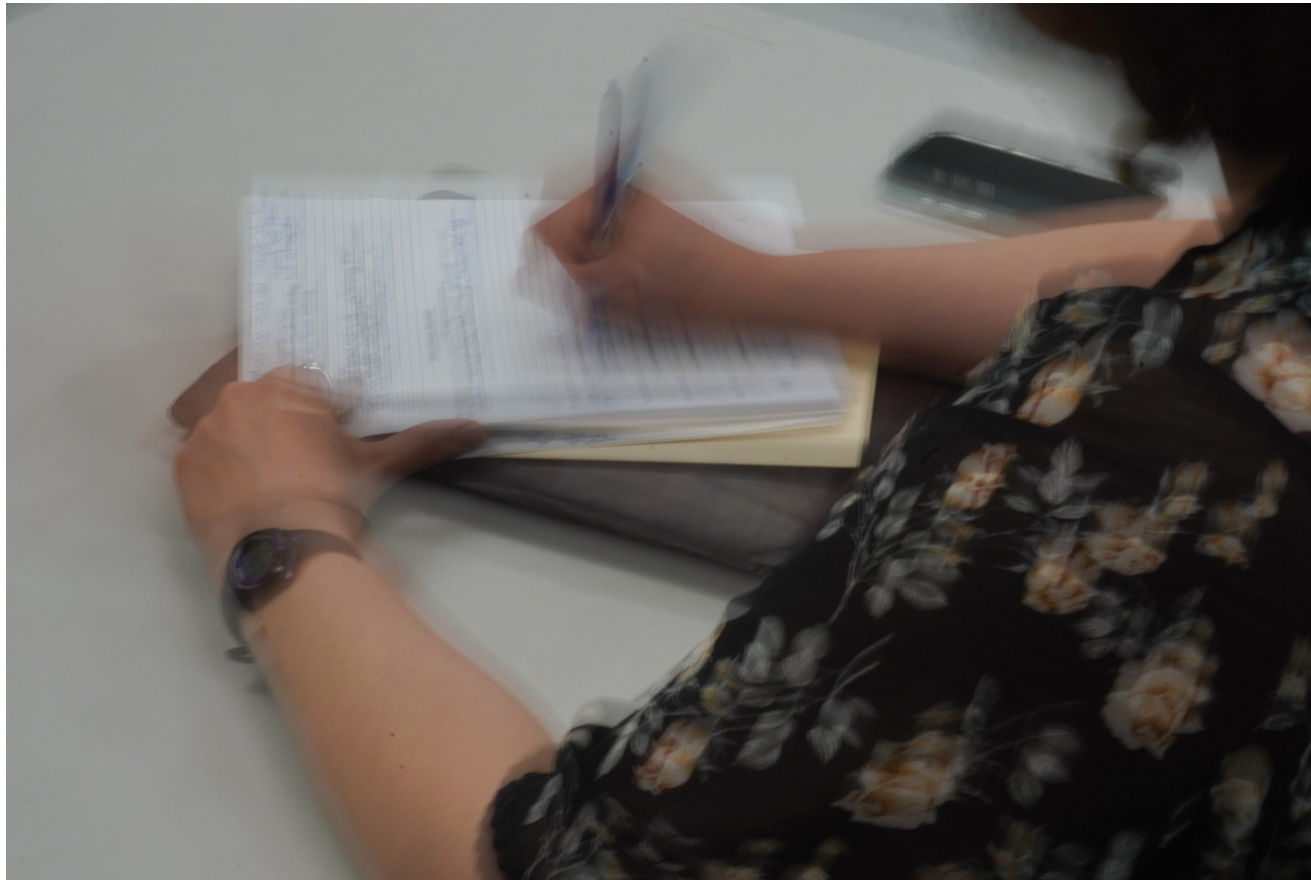
Rachel Lewis sits in Judge Lynne Perkins Division 31 courtroom on Thursday, March 13, 2025, in St. Louis. Lewis one of two full-time social workers embedded in the St. Louis trial office of the Missouri State Public Defender System.



Lewis and St. Louis public defender Brendan Kottenstette prepare for an upcoming hearing where Lewis is set to testify. The social workers don't often go to court, yet alone testify. Their work is behind the scenes, helping clients and assisting attorneys. Lewis testified to the research she had done on recidivism rates of female felons convicted of sex-related crimes. With her testimony, the client was able to have her bond conditions loosened and have more freedom to mother her children while her case is still ongoing.



From left, Logan Flori, a fellow Holistic Defense Services team member and Annie Legomsky, the head of HDS, talk with Lewis about a case in her office on Wednesday, Feb. 5, 2025 in St. Louis. "MSPD launched the HDS program in 2022 in response to long-term planning initiative where MSPD staff overwhelmingly requested the support of social workers in their offices," Legomsky said. Currently, it is made up of full-time social workers, social worker student interns, AmeriCorps Holistic Advocates, and Partners for Justice employees across the state.



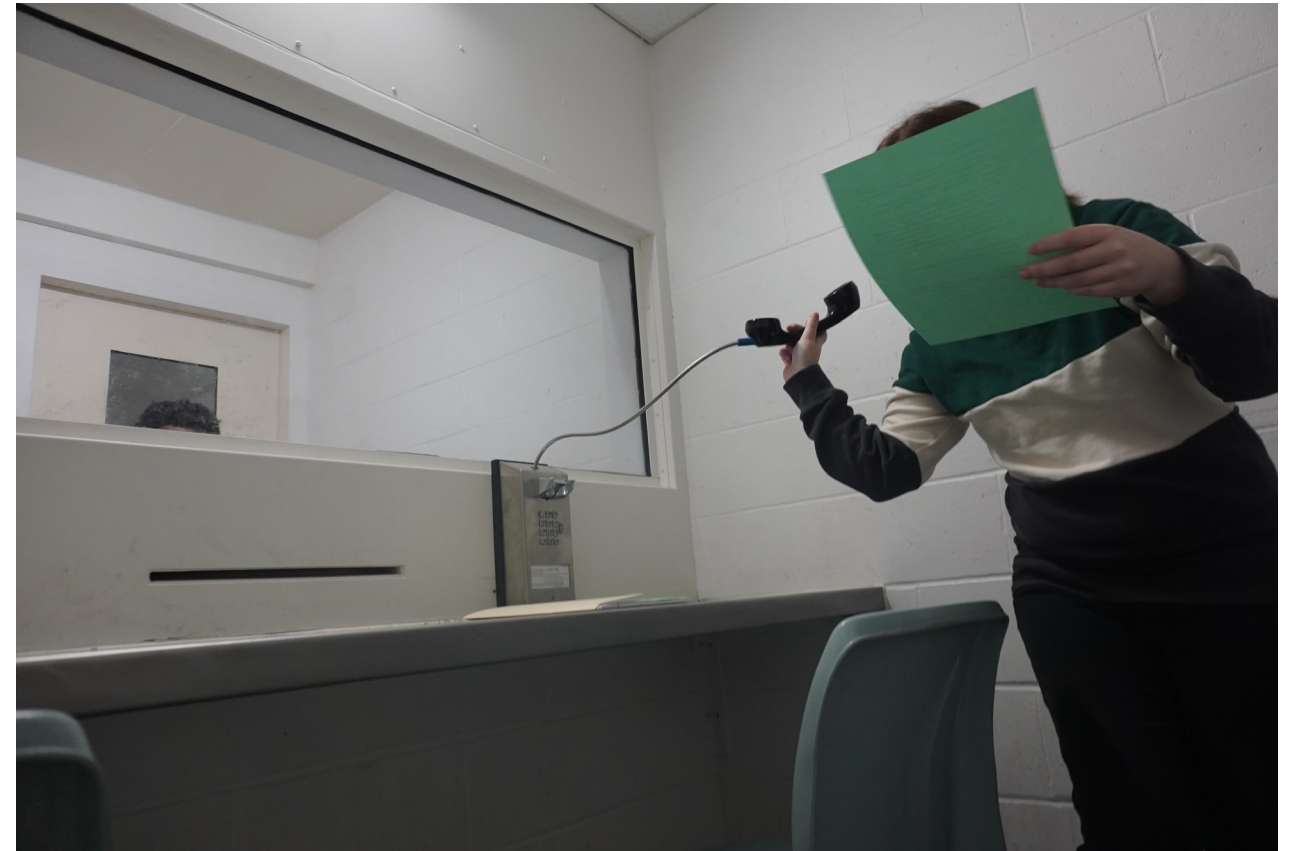
Lewis writes down the oral history of a client on Wednesday, Feb. 26, 2025, at the city jail, in St. Louis. Oral histories are a major portion of the work the social workers do for their clients' cases. They are a part of a "mitigation memo", which tells the life stories of the clients before their criminal case. The process includes evidence-based research and recommends how to best address the needs of the client.



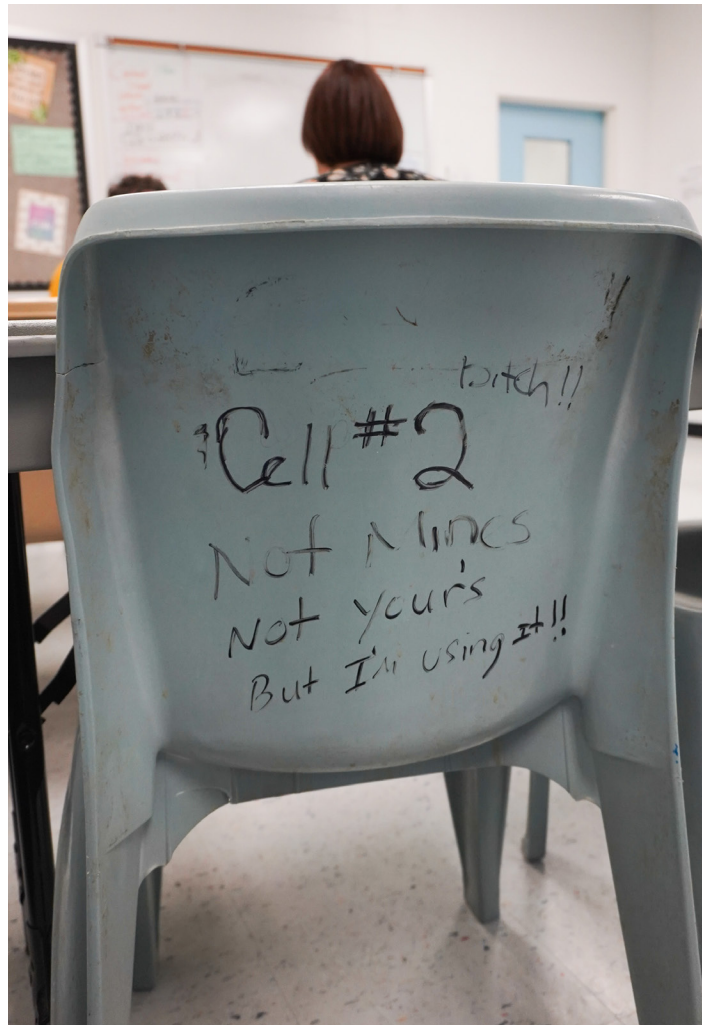
Scott Nistler, St. Louis trial office public defender investigator, walks down the hallway of one the office complex on Tuesday, March 25, 2025, in St. Louis. The sign on the floor and the photo on the wall are remnants of a Public Defender Demonstration and March during the summer of 2020 in protest police brutality. Public defender systems often see themselves as more than just employees, but advocates for social justice. Defending clients who cannot afford to defend themselves is often seen as a check on the unjust institution that is the criminal justice system.



Lewis talks with Ryan Wolfe, a St. Louis trial office public defender, before a hearing in Judge Lynne Perkins' courtroom on Thursday, March 13, 2025, in St. Louis. Lewis was there for her client's bond hearing to share updates about the treatment plans she lined up over the past weeks.



Emily Lucas, Lewis' fellow full-time social worker in the St. Louis area offices, moves to show a client in the city jail a paper with homeless shelter resources on Wednesday, Feb. 26, 2025, in St. Louis. When not in the office talking with attorneys or in meetings, social workers go to jail often to visit clients. Visitation of clients within the jail is either a contact room, where they are in the same space, or the non-contact room, where they are separated by a small slit and a phone. The overwhelming case load and the buracracy of the city jail often make it hard for the



A chair inside a contact room within the St. Louis city jail stands with notes from inmates and other visitors on Wednesday, Feb. 26, 2025, in St. Louis. A goal for the public defenders and social workers is to make sure clients aren't being held just because they are unhoused or are in need of health services. MSPD employees from across the state have expressed concerns about jail conditions, which are controlled by whoever is in charge of the jail and the funding that comes from the county.



Lewis sits with a client in the St. Louis while she completes their oral history in the city jail on Wednesday, Feb. 26, 2025, in St. Louis. Oral histories aren't often the easiest tasks to complete. They can take hours at a time, sometimes taking three or more visits to complete to build trust with the clients. Often clients' stories are filled with abuse, trauma and past criminal activity. They also describe the client's strengths, their support system and the successes they've had in their lives before being charged with a crime.



From left, HDS intern Clair Antoine, Lewis and Emily Lucas discuss other community resources they could partner with on Wednesday, March 19, 2025, in St. Louis. The social workers in the system are the bridge between incarcerated clients and the outside world. They are always looking for new non-profits, religious organizations and social safety net systems to partner with to expand the network that can help clients once they are out of custody. It's not an easy task. These organizations are often subject to funding woes, have long waitlists or are unable to help clients with certain serious charges.

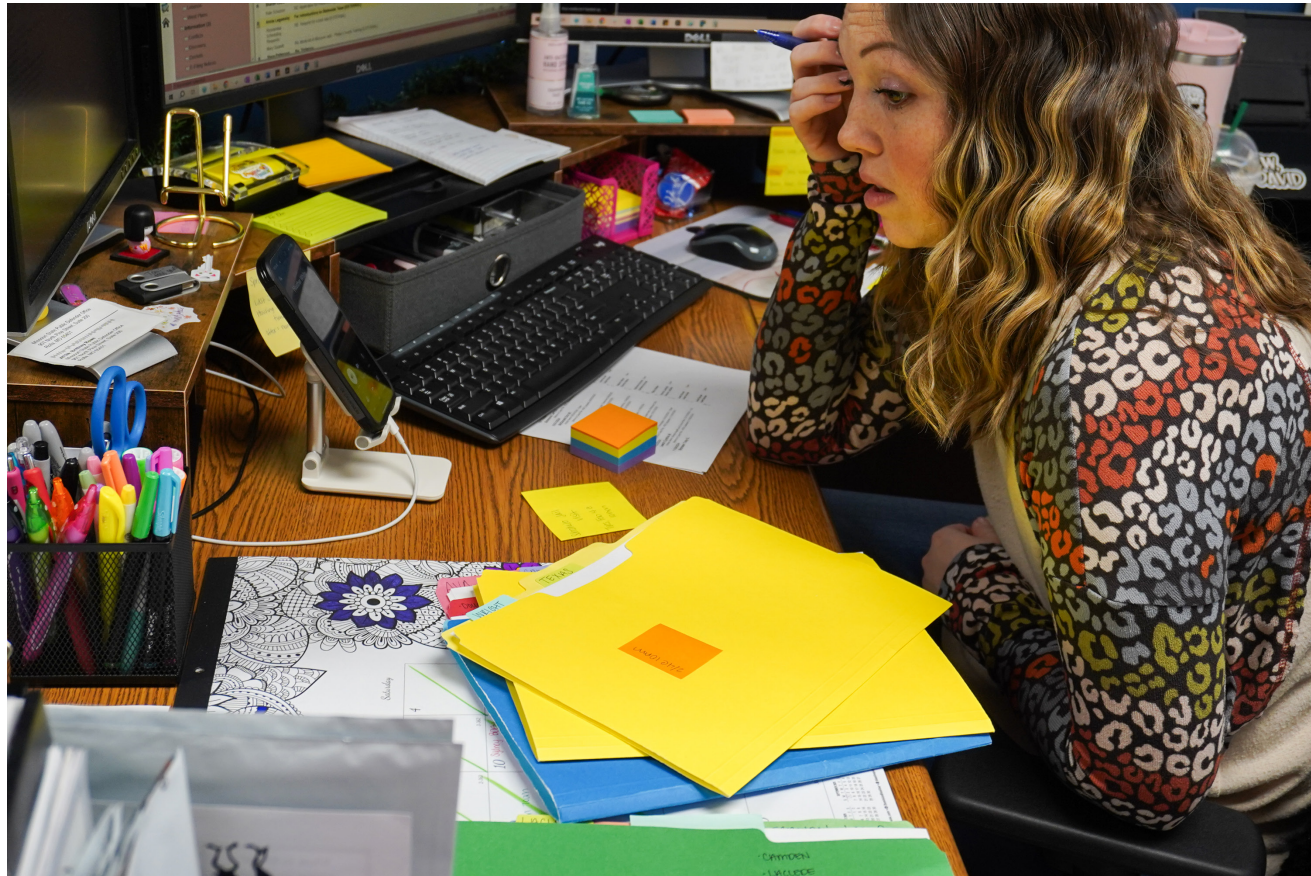


Lewis talks to St. Louis trial attorney Sam Lawrence after a chance encounter on the way to visiting the city jail on Thursday, April 10, 2025, in St. Louis. Lewis says of the job “The biggest impact, what brings me the most satisfaction is I played some small part in a client getting released, returning to their family, returning to their community, being successful and avoiding incarceration.”

# Brittney Rowe - Rolla, Mo



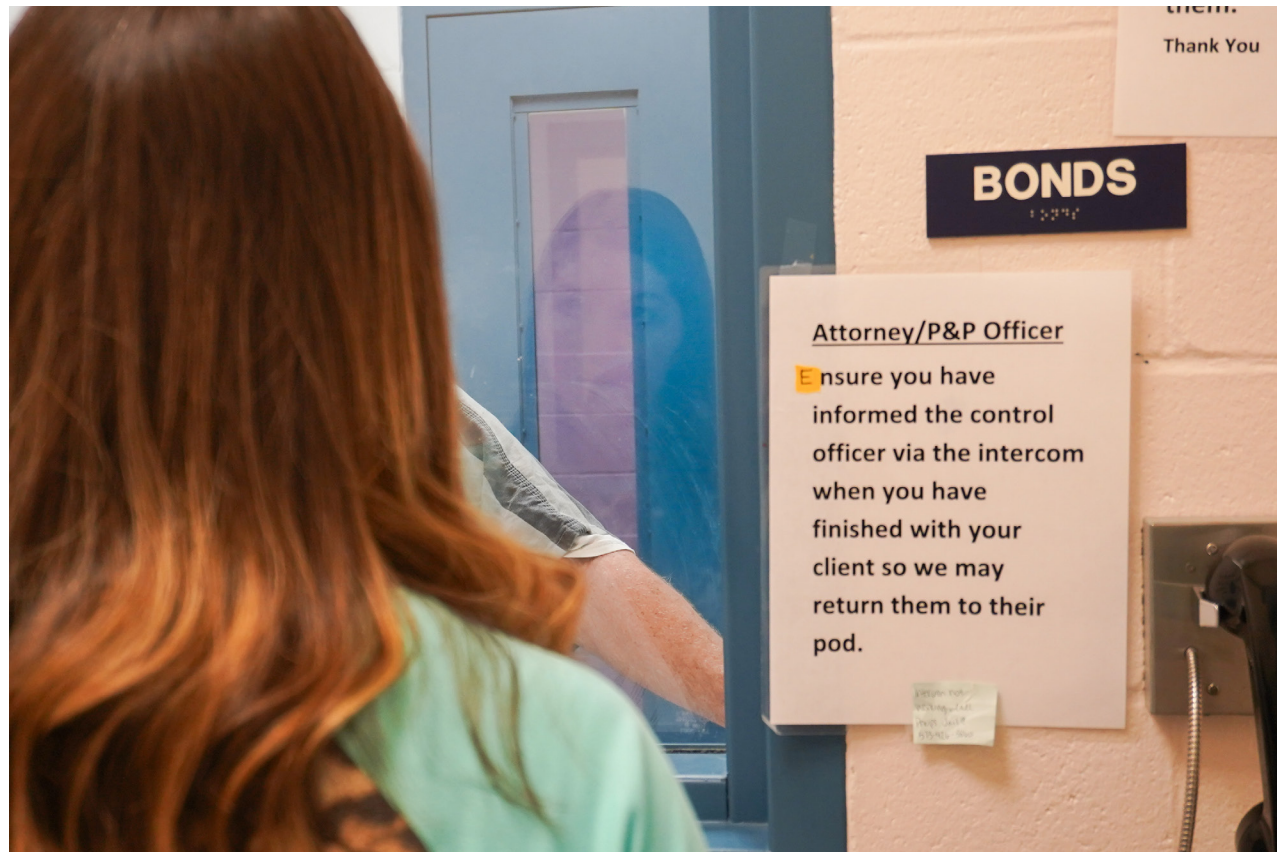
Brittney Rowe, left, sits with client Dustin Hardcastle on Wednesday, Jan. 29, 2025, at the Lebanon trial office, in Lebanon, Mo. Rowe is sitting with Hardcastle to finalize a mitigation memo, which they hope will allow Hardcastle to receive probation on a DUI charge instead of prison time. The of the memo is to give “Some sort idea of you so they [prosecutors and judges] see you differently.” In the eyes of Rowe, Hardcastle has “absolutely turned his life around” since she first began work on his case.



Rowe sits at her desk while on a phone call with a colleague on Friday, Jan. 24th, 2025, in Rolla, Mo. The clients she serves are spread across 13 counties, from Morgan County near the state capital in Jefferson City or Ozark County near the Missouri/Arkansas border. Attorneys in the Missouri state public defender system and nationwide is often labeled with stereotypes of being “overworked, underpaid and understaffed.” Having social workers in system aims to help remove those labels.



Folders of the various paperwork sits on Rowe’s desk on Wednesday, March 26, 2025, in Rolla, Mo. While the majority of the social services Rowe works with are for addiction treatment and housing, her work extends to government assistance, job searches and more. The goal of her work is to help clients succeed while on bond, ultimately trying to reduce the chance of recidivism and improve their case outcome.



Rowe talks to a client in the Phelps County Jail's non-contact room on Wednesday, Feb. 26, 2025, in Rolla, Mo. Because Rowe is not an attorney and is there to help beyond the legal strategy, they feel comfortable talking about jail conditions, their family, other civil cases and life in rural Missouri. This includes sometimes being a go-between from the client to their attorney, who is often in court or visiting other clients at different jails. "Part of my job is advocating for you to your attorney," Rowe has said when talking to clients.



Rowe sits with Josh Johnston on Friday, March 7, 2025, at the Phelps County Jail, in Rolla, Mo. The most common service that Rowe helps clients enter is addiction treatment. In rural Missouri, that can be community health programs like CORE (communities of recovery experience) or religious organizations like Mission Gate. Through the HDS grant funding, Rowe helps coordinate the use of HDS funds to ensure that application fees are paid on behalf of clients. One client's situation warranted Rowe calling all the local churches to collection donation money to help pay a program fee. "I've been told I am anything if not persistent. I take that as a compliment."



Rowe sits at her desk on Wednesday, March 26, 2025, in Rolla, Mo. Rowe is a working Mom, married to her husband and has two young kids. Working full-time has all the typical hardships that a work/life balance brings. Even more this year, where the storms this spring brought tornados to Rolla. Her property was not damaged, but the school buildings for her kids were. When recalling the impact the storms had, she wondered about the clients she knows are unhoused in the area.



Rowe chats with her friend and co-worker Jamie Malinda on Friday, Jan. 24, 2025, in Rolla, Mo. They joked about how big their kids are getting. Rowe can be described as a “Mom” of the office as well, whether it is being the ears to her co-workers coming to her to vent about life, or giving the winter gloves off of her hands to a client who’s in need of them during the winter months.



A “free toothbrush + paste” sign sits alongside free blankets in the front hallway of the Rolla office on Wednesday, Jan. 22, 2025, in Rolla, Mo. Much of the work the Holistic Defense Services do is beyond what they do for clients inside a jail or courtroom. Their philosophy of helping clients through social services includes providing a variety of goods for clients, free of charge: blankets and jackets in the winter, clothing for their kids, and NARCAN nasal spray.



Rowe hauls a box of clothing donations outside of the office on Friday, Jan. 31, 2025, in Rolla, Mo. Rowe’s passion for helping clients extends beyond the office. Four or five times a year, she brings collected donations from her co-workers and gives them to local charities. At various points throughout the year, her office is filled with clothing, bulk toothbrushes, waterproof warming blankets, homemade birthday boxes for kids, books and puzzles to donate to jails and more.



Rowe meets with Anna French, a Four Rivers community health worker to drop up clothing donations on Friday, Jan. 31, 2025, at Abundent Blessings donation center in Rolla, Mo. Sources for Rowe's donations include local dentist offices, the Amazon surplus store, extra hotel toiletries and more. By the end of the visit, Rowe and French were discussing what supplies Abundent Blessings is short of and how Rowe can help fill that gap.



Rowe walks up the steps of the Phelps County Jail to visit incarcerated clients on Monday, March 31, 2025, in Rolla, Mo. Rowe's attitude towards every conversation with a client is kind but serious, informative and uplifting, always expressing genuine care and confidence in the client no matter what their situation is.



Dustin Hardcastle walks out of Judge John Beger's courtroom with his fiancée on Tuesday, March 18, 2025, in Rolla, Mo. After months of litigation by his attorney Lizzie Dejoie and the discussion Rowe's mitigation memo with the prosecution, Hardcastle was given probation for his DUI case instead of prison. With Rowe's help, he succeeded on bond while out of custody, found addiction treatment through sober living, found a job locally and is now engaged.

To my Dad and Jenny  
To Kevin  
To Tristen and Clayton  
To Bailey B, Ansley, Li Xuan, Jacob, Sophie and Kate  
To all the Missouri State Public Defenders and employees, past and present  
To every client who has been through the system  
To all who have had a quarter life crisis career change

The biggest of thank yous to my committee members, my guiding lights throughout my time here in graduate school: Jackie Bell, Nick Mathews, Lynden Steele and Chelsea R. Mitchell.

Thank you to the Missouri State Public Defender System, in particular Annie Legomsky, Jane Duncan, Rachel Lewis and Brittney Rowe for their collaboration on this project.

It would also not have been possible without the constant support of my family and friends, from Massachusetts to Missouri to California and every place in between.

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Ellie Frysztak is a photojournalist. Born in the northwest suburbs of Chicago. Her professional career has been a journey eastbound down I-70 here in Missouri. She began as a public defender investigator in Liberty, went back to school in Columbia, and wonders where the next journey will be.



From left, Ellie Frysztak, Brandon Williams and John Parker pose for a photo during their first week working for the Missouri State Public Defender in the summer of 2019.



Ellie Frysztak poses for a photo during an assignment covering invasive species in the rivers of Central Michigan.



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