

Profile in Service: Lauren Cudaback



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DPD’s *Profiles in Service* series continues with Lauren Cudaback, who uses her master’s degree in social work as a mitigation specialist serving both adult and minor public defense clients facing felony charges. Mitigation specialists like Lauren use their training to build trusting relationships with DPD’s clients to support their litigation goals throughout their case.

Using a number of clinical techniques and framing, such as trauma-informed and motivational interviewing, attachment theory, systems theory, and with a strong understanding of the components of behavioral health assessment and treatment, mitigation specialists review records, interview clients and family members, and document and contextualize factors leading to a client’s involvement in the legal system in mitigation reports. Attorneys rely on these reports when advocating for judges and prosecutors to exercise their discretion over a client’s case with compassion.

The following Q&A has been edited for clarity and length.

What drew you into public defense?

I started out in crisis response after I finished my master’s program. The team I worked on responded to calls from police and the fire department. They would call us when someone was having a behavioral health crisis or other crisis in the community. We helped some of

the most vulnerable people in King County – people with serious mental health issues, people who struggled with substance use, people with disabilities, and people who experienced chronic homelessness. I did that for three years during the height of the pandemic. When leaving crisis work, I knew I wanted to continue working with vulnerable populations.

A friend of mine from grad school was working at DPD and she told me about how this role gave her the chance to tell people's stories, and I'd always enjoyed writing, so I decided to apply when there was an opening. I knew a lot of people held in jail also had behavioral health issues and experienced homelessness. I thought public defense would be a natural next step. The mitigation specialist role offered a different way to help the same client population, and it offered more opportunities for long-term connection.

What keeps you engaged in this work?

In short, the relationships I get to build with our clients. I have more of an opportunity to get to know them in this role, and I really enjoy writing about a client's life in a way that can hopefully change a judge or prosecutor's mind about who they really are. I think that even though we live in a very liberal city, people who don't work with our clients don't really understand the realities of what they're going through or how people come to be involved in the legal system. There are these preconceived ideas that we get from the media that don't reflect reality, and my hope is that my reports can help break those down – especially for these people who are making important decisions about our clients' lives. I try to make the prosecutors and judges see the whole person – understanding their childhood, trauma, family, culture, relationships, rather than reducing them to the alleged charge or their criminal history.

The other aspect that has kept me passionate about my work is learning from my clients. I provide an opportunity for them to tell their story and to be heard, but at the same time they are teaching me about their lived experience and the lived experience of so many people who find themselves in custody. The things they have been through are so complex and so nuanced. Clients tell me things I've never considered before. They challenge my way of thinking. This makes me a better mitigation specialist for future clients, and it also makes me a better person in general. I am forever grateful that they trust me with their stories.

What does the typical week look like for a mitigation specialist in public defense?

Typically, I'll get a couple of new assignments and then organize my week around which clients I need to visit in the jail. Whenever I'm not working on trying to get clients out of jail or trying to connect them with treatment providers, I'm writing about a client's life in a report that the attorney can use to either help negotiate their case or might be used for

sentencing. I also write up reports and collect records to give to an expert for when the defense team decides to retain one for negotiations or an upcoming trial. That way, the expert is not starting from scratch when getting to know our client.

There's always unexpected things that happen, like a client unexpectedly getting out of custody who needs you to come up with a release plan in a short amount of time – something that would normally take a couple of weeks. It's a lot of thinking quickly on your feet, which is familiar to me from my time doing crisis response. Those situations carry a lot of pressure, since you don't want a delay to cause a client to sit in jail longer than they should. I find the urgency motivating. One of the aspects of this work I find so compelling is the variety in what you're doing and how you're helping people.

How do you manage the stressful nature of working in public defense?

I have to keep a really strong boundary between work and life outside of work. I spend a lot of time with my family and my dog Phoebe, who brings a lot of joy to my life. Now that I'm a semi-seasoned social worker, I've learned that you have to turn your brain off or else you're going to drive yourself nuts.

When something doesn't work out, I try to move on and try and do the best that I can for the next person. I'll tell myself, okay, if I get a similar case, maybe I'll do this thing in addition next time, or I'll tweak this other thing, and then I just move on to the next case. I allow myself that time for reflection, and then I move on because there's more cases that need attention. Having really good supervision helps too – I meet with my supervisor Jen every other week and we talk about various challenges. The job requires talking about pretty serious stuff with clients and there are definitely things that affect me, but not ignoring it and processing it with someone else in the work is extremely helpful.

When you reflect on your time at DPD, is there a case where you felt you made a difference or client whose story has stuck with you?

Yes, there was a client who was facing felony charges and possible prison time who I was able to help avoid incarceration. The mitigation specialists at DPD got a local mental health provider to agree to conduct in-custody mental health assessments, which was unheard of until recently. Not only did that allow us to get a current diagnosis for this client to advocate for a mental health sentencing alternative (MHSA), but it established a connection to the service provider who would monitor the client during the MHSA. In addition to finding a housing placement for the client, I wrote a report to go along with the client's mental health evaluation that the defense team used to advocate for the client to avoid incarceration entirely and be released to the MHSA.

It took significant collaboration between the providers, our office, and the jail to make this happen. I think it shows a lot of promise for what could happen in the future if there were more resources and funding for these kinds of alternatives to prison. I strongly believe that there are solutions to end mass incarceration if we are willing to invest the time, resources and creativity necessary. In the meantime, even **being able to help one person is what gives me hope and keeps me going.**