

EXPLORER'S PROGRAM: MECKLENBURG COUNTY PUBLIC DEFENDER'S OFFICE

Meeting: Wednesday evenings, 6:00pm – 7:30pm.

Schedule: March 4, 2026 – May 20, 2026

Goal: Introduce students to the practice of indigent criminal defense. Each session the students will learn a specific topic about the criminal justice system. The program will revolve around a fact pattern wherein students will get to play the part of an Assistant Public Defender. Students will be able to collaborate with attorneys, gain insight from Mecklenburg County District Court judges, visit the Mecklenburg County Detention Center, and conduct a simulated bond hearing. At the end of the program, students will be able to critically examine the criminal justice system, recognize and understand the use of propaganda, and distinguish between restorative and punitive rehabilitation models.

- **Week 1: March 4, 2026** – Welcome to the Public Defender's Office
 - Leader: Mina Ezikpe
 - Topic: Open with an introductory statement from Chief Public Defender, Kevin Tully. Mina will teach students about the importance of storytelling and the *Gideon's Promise* technique. The focus of this session will be how we can use storytelling to effectively advocate for our clients.
 - Interactive Activity: Student Lead Introductions
 - Students will break off into pairs and each take turns introducing their partner to the rest of the group. In doing so, students will have an opportunity to empathize with their classmates and experience what it's like having someone else advocate on your behalf.

- **Week 2: March 11, 2026** – *Continuing Discussion on Storytelling*
 - Leader: Midushi Pandey
 - Topic: Continuing lessons of storytelling. Midushi will highlight the importance of client centered advocacy. This session of storytelling will focus specifically on trauma informed interviewing.
 - Interactive Activity: Attorney Interview
 - Students will meet with their hypothetical clients in jail and hold an initial interview. The purpose of this exercise is for students to practice building rapport with a client.

- **Week 3: March 18, 2026** – *Judge's Panel*
 - Leader: Selin Roberts and Graham Lowder

- Topic: Judge's Panel. We will have a panel of current Mecklenburg County district court judges answering the student's questions. The judges will focus their speaking on wellness court and other alternatives to confinement/probation. Students will also hear from Assistant Public Defender, Adam Owensby, the lead attorney for Mecklenburg County's Recovery Court. The purpose of this session is for students to be able to speak directly with established leaders within the courthouse.
- Interactive Activity: Panel Discussion
- **Week 4: March 25, 2026 – Formerly Incarcerated Persons Panel**
 - Leader: Brianna Buford
 - Topic: Formerly Incarcerated Persons Panel. Panel led by Gemini Boyd, social worker with the Mecklenburg County Public Defender's Office. Gemini will be able to speak about his life in prison, the collateral consequences of a criminal conviction, and the incarcerated experience as it pertains to Charlotte, NC.
 - Interactive Activity: Call with Client's Mother
 - Following the panel, students will act as attorneys and prepare for their client's bond hearing. Students will call the loved ones of their client to gather information that they will use for their final bond hearings.
- **Week 5: April 1, 2026 – Political Literacy**
 - Leader: Cristiano Mendez and Daniel Wilkes
 - Topic: In this week's session students, will look at how propaganda is used to fuel mass incarceration and increase policing. Students will be shown the ripple effects of a "tough on crime" approach. Because marginalized communities often suffer the most from these tactics, students will be taught what life could be like with a criminal justice system that focuses on restoration.
 - Interactive Activity: TBD.
- **April 8th – Off Students Spring Break**
- **Week 6: April 15, 2026 – Tour of the Jail**
 - Leader: Emily Spitler
 - Topic: Jail Tour – Students will go on a tour of the local jail led by the Mecklenburg County Sheriff's Office.

- Interactive Activity: Tour of the Mecklenburg County Detention Center
 - Students will get to tour the jail, followed by a roundtable discussion of their experience.
- **Week 7: April 22, 2026 – *The Fourth, Fifth, and Sixth Amendment***
 - Leader: Graham Lowder, Brianna Buford, and Barbara Bathke
 - Topic: The 4th, 5th, and 6th Amendments of the U.S. Constitution are the bedrock of our rights against the government. Through these amendments, we are given the right to privacy in our homes and persons, the right to not self-incriminate, the right to an attorney if you cannot afford counsel, and so much more. Students will be taught how to exercise these amendments in different scenarios, whether in the home, car, or on the street.
 - Interactive Activity: Good Cop, Bad Cop
 - Three attorneys will act as police officers. Each “officer” will seek to question a student about a hypothetical fact pattern. Students will have the opportunity to exercise their rights in a controlled setting.
- **May 6th – Off Public Defender Conference**
- **Week 8: May 13, 2026 – *Crime and Punishment***
 - Leader: Daniel Wilkes and Midushi Pandey
 - Topic: What is the purpose of punishment? This session will look at the different models of rehabilitation. When a defendant is punished for a crime, the State seeks to levy a sentence that is both sufficiently punitive to deter future behavior and rehabilitative in that the defendant will not repeat their mistakes. Successfully mitigating damages to your client can greatly reduce the punishment given by a judge. Students will be taught North Carolina sentencing laws, learn the importance of effective mitigation, and shown how to prepare for representing a client during a sentencing hearing.
 - Interactive Activity: Sentencing Hearings
 - The main goal of a sentencing hearing is to mitigate the punishment sought by the District Attorney. Students will get to practice sentencing hearings by representing one another.
- **Week 9: May 20, 2026 – *Final Session/Bond Hearings***
 - Topic: In the final session of the Public Defender’s Explorer’s Program, students will conduct simulated bond hearings. Using the same fact pattern above, students will advocate for their client to be released from custody as

they await their trial. Pending Sheriff approval, students will be able to use actual courtrooms in the Mecklenburg County courthouse. Additionally, students will receive feedback from a real district court judge on their efforts. At the conclusion of this session, students should be able to understand the importance of zealous advocacy and how to craft an effective defense for their client.

- Interactive Activity: Bond Hearings
 - Using all the tools we have learned throughout the spring, students will have bond hearings advocating for their client's release from jail.