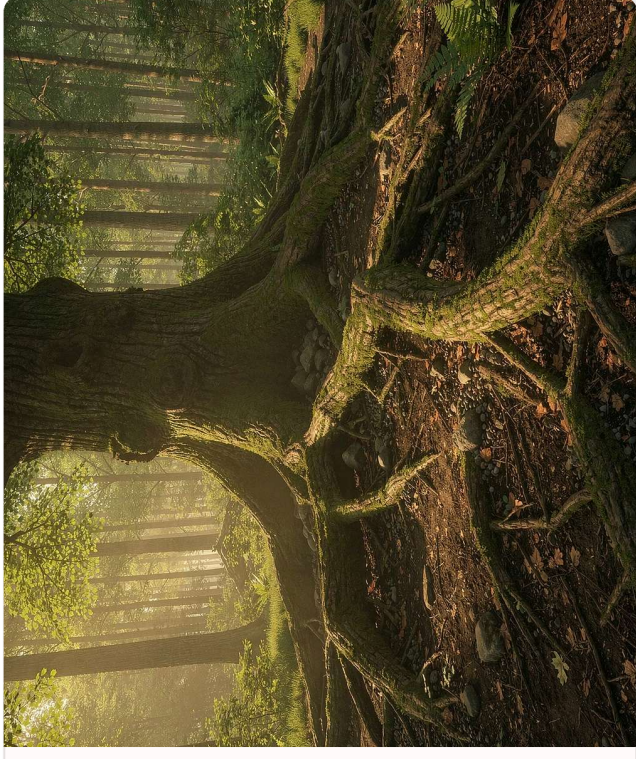


Rooted: Grounded in Work That Can Shake You

Georgia Public Defender Council — Defender Summer Conference

July 2026





Reflection

Before we begin, take a breath. Look around this room. Every person here chose work that places them between a person and the full weight of the state. That is not ordinary. That is not small.

The Work Is Different

Because the stakes are human — every case, every client, every decision carries real consequences for real lives.

This Room Carries Weight

The collective experience, sacrifice, and dedication in this space is extraordinary. You deserve to be seen in that.

The Weight We Carry

Public defense work is among the most demanding in the legal system — not just intellectually, but emotionally and morally. The weight is real, and it compounds daily.

Impossible Caseloads

Hundreds of lives depending on you at once. No time or system accounts for

Limited Resources

Fighting for clients with tools and time that rarely match the scale of the need

Human Consequences

Every outcome lands on someone's life, someone's family. The stakes are not

Our Shared Reality

This work is not carried by attorneys alone. Every member of the defender team absorbs the weight of the mission. The burden — and the purpose — belongs to all of us.



Attorneys

Carrying caseloads, making impossible calls, standing alone in courtrooms on behalf of the vulnerable.



Investigators

Walking into difficult spaces to find the truth, often unseen and under-resourced.



Social Workers

Holding the human story — trauma histories, family systems, crisis intervention — with extraordinary care.



Clerical Staff

The steady infrastructure that holds the operation together, absorbing urgency from every direction.



Leadership

Navigating institutional pressure while trying to protect the people and the mission underneath them.

When the Work Follows You Home

There are moments that stay. A client's face before sentencing. A phone call you couldn't make in time. A verdict that didn't reflect the truth. These moments don't clock out when you do.

The Unseen Moments That Stay

Secondary trauma doesn't announce itself. It accumulates quietly—in the stories we absorb, the outcomes we carry, and the humanity we hold for those who are forgotten by the system.

The Emotional Residue of Advocacy

Advocacy at this level leaves a mark. That residue is not weakness—it is evidence that you are fully present in work that demands your whole self.



Naming the Reality

We have to be honest about what this work does to us—not to dramatize it, but to address it with the same rigor we bring to our cases. Naming it is the first act of care.

1

2

3

Functioning Under Pressure

High performance in high-stakes environments normalizes stress until the body and mind stop signaling distress — and that silence is dangerous.

Trauma Exposure

Repeated exposure to trauma — yours and your clients' — without intentional processing creates a cumulative wound that demands attention.

The Cost of Constant Urgency

When urgency is the default state, the nervous system never fully rests. Over time, this erodes judgment, empathy, and the capacity to connect.

Competence can disguise exhaustion.

You can be excellent at your job and deeply depleted at the same time. The two are not mutually exclusive — and in public defense, they are often inseparable.

Performance does not mean you are unaffected. Showing up every day, doing the work with precision and care, does not mean the weight isn't accumulating. It just means you are very good at carrying it. That is not the same as being okay.

What It Means to Be Rooted

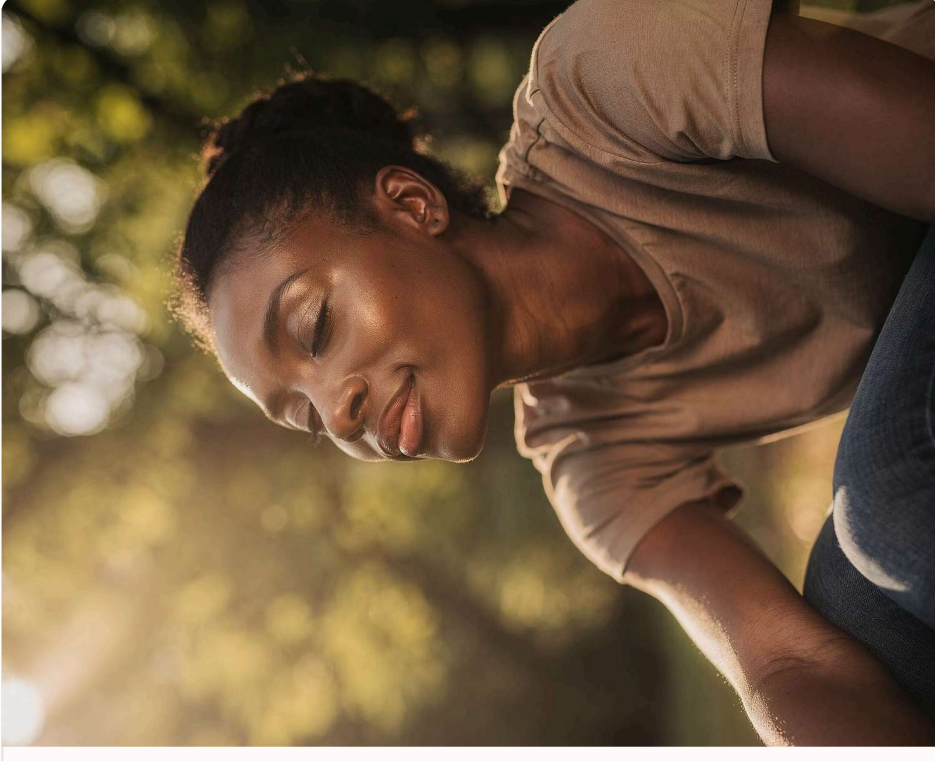
Being rooted doesn't mean being unmoved. It means having something to return to when the work shakes you — an internal center that holds even when the circumstances don't.

Returning to Yourself Under Pressure

Groundedness is not the absence of difficulty. It is the practiced ability to find your footing again — in the middle of a hard day, a hard case, a hard season.

Response Over Reaction

When you are rooted, you create space between the stimulus and your action. That space is where wisdom lives — where your best advocacy and leadership emerge.



The Pause Is Power

In a culture that equates motion with progress, pausing feels counterintuitive — even irresponsible. But in high-stakes work, the pause is not delay. It is preparation. It is precision.



Breath as Reset



Returning to Center

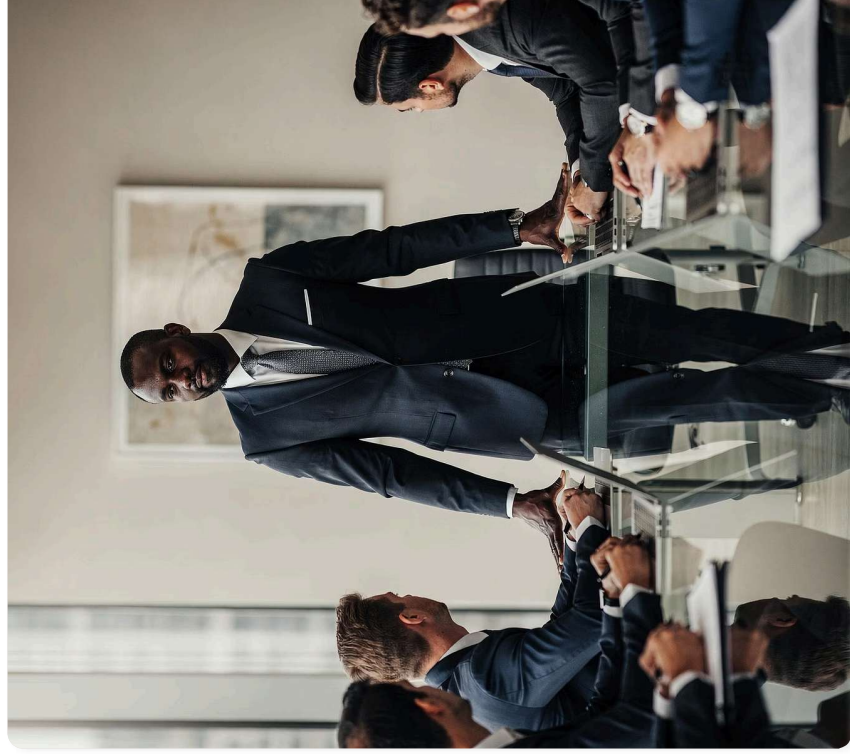


Reflection Exercise

Ask yourself: *Where am I right now — mentally, emotionally, physically?* Not to judge the answer, but to honestly know it. Awareness is the entry point for everything else.

Three intentional breaths — in through the nose, out through the mouth — activate the parasympathetic nervous system. This is not soft. This is science. It changes your physiology in real time.

Identify your anchor — a value, a person, a reason. When the work pulls you sideways, the anchor brings you back. Practice finding it before you desperately need it.



Rooted Leadership

Leadership in public defense asks you to hold the pressure of systems, staff, and clients simultaneously. Rooted leaders don't have all the answers — they have a steadiness that others can rely on.

Clarity Under Pressure

Rooted leaders slow down to assess before they act. They resist the urgency trap — not by ignoring urgency, but by choosing deliberate response over reflexive reaction.

Intentional Decision-Making

When you lead from a grounded place, your decisions are guided by values — not fear, exhaustion, or the loudest voice in the room. That consistency builds trust and models wellness for the entire team.

Restoration Is Not a Luxury.

It is professional discipline — as essential to your practice as legal research, case preparation, or client communication.

- 📌 In fields with high trauma exposure, restoration is not optional self-care. It is an operational requirement. When you are depleted, your clients feel it. When you are restored, so is your capacity to fight for them.

What Exhaustion Costs

Exhaustion is not just personal — it has professional consequences that ripple outward. Understanding the real cost is part of taking the work seriously.



Judgment



Patience

Exhausted minds miss what rested minds catch. Legal



Perspective

When depleted, the urgent crowds out the important. You lose the long view — the one that reminds you why this case, this person, this moment matters.

Clients in crisis need you steady. Exhaustion shortens the



Connection

The human bond between advocate and client is your most powerful tool. Exhaustion erodes empathy — and empathy is the foundation of that connection.

Restoration Practices

Restoration doesn't require retreat centers or long vacations. It requires intention. Small, consistent practices compound into resilience over time.



Community Is the Why

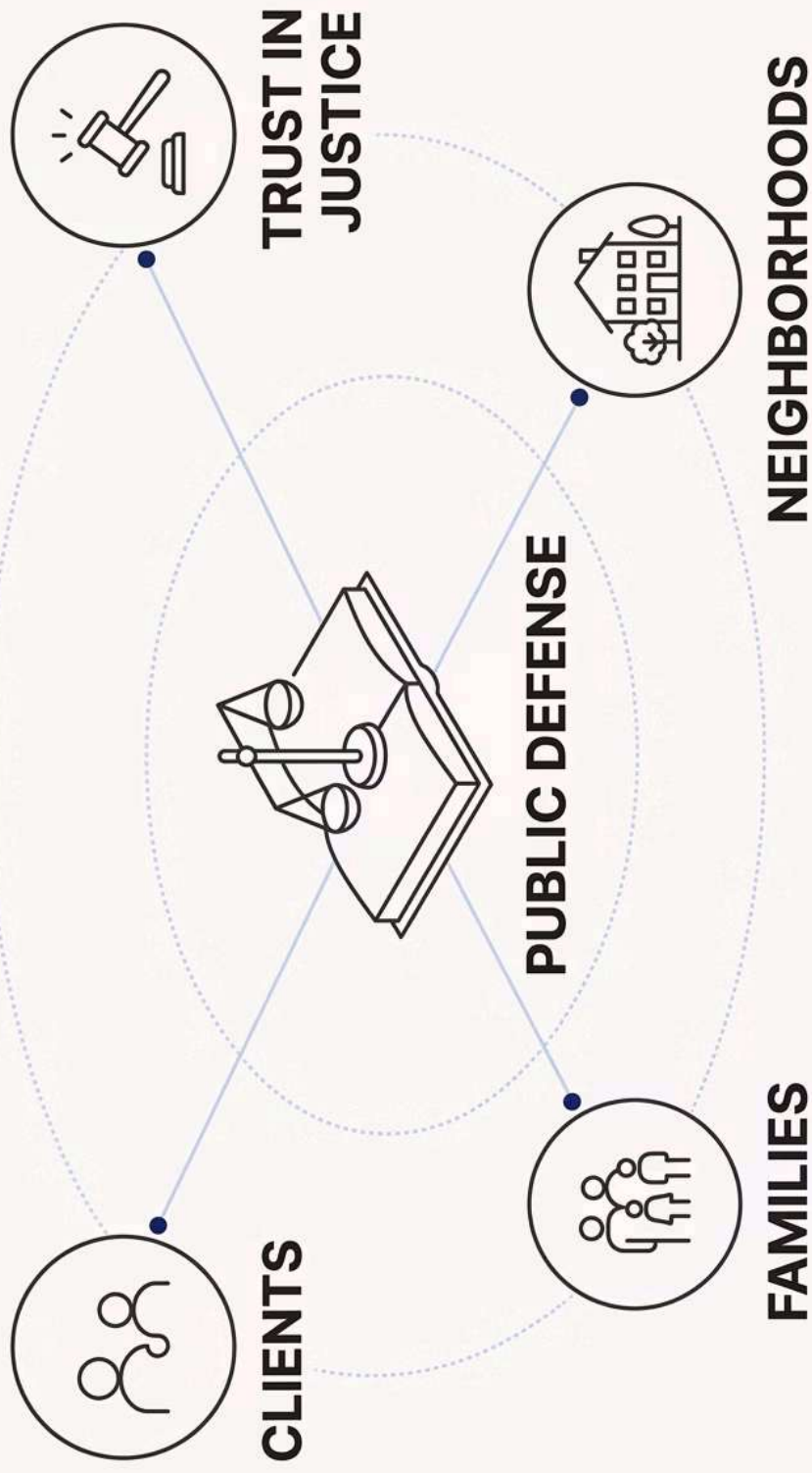
On the hardest days — when resources are thin, the system feels immovable, and the losses stack up — return to this:

This is not file management. This is community preservation.

Every client is someone's child, parent, neighbor, or friend. Every defense mounted with integrity sends a message to entire communities that someone stood up. That someone showed up. That the Constitution was not just for the privileged. **The work you do holds communities together.**

The Ripple Effect

Your work doesn't end with a verdict or a sentence. Its effects extend far beyond the courtroom — through families, through neighborhoods, through generations of trust or distrust in the justice system.



When you defend one person with full humanity and commitment, you send a message to every community they belong to: *You matter. Your rights matter. Someone will stand for you.*

No One Stands Alone

Public defense was never designed to be carried individually. The system is underfunded by design — which means the only sustainable response is collective strength.

Public Defense Is Ecosystem Work

Every role on the team is essential. When one person falters, the ecosystem absorbs it — which is why we have a responsibility to hold each other as carefully as we hold our clients.

Connection Is Infrastructure

- **Collaboration in scarcity** — sharing resources, strategies, and burdens rather than competing in isolation
- **Collective strength** — what we cannot carry alone, we can carry together. The relationships in this room are not incidental. They are structural.



3 Commitments to Carry Forward

The work will shake you. That is not a failure of preparation — it is the nature of work done at this depth. But you can always return to center. These three commitments are your map back.

Return to Yourself

When pressure pulls you away from who you are — your values, your

Restore Intentionally

Do not wait until you are broken to seek restoration. Build it in now — small,

Remain Connected

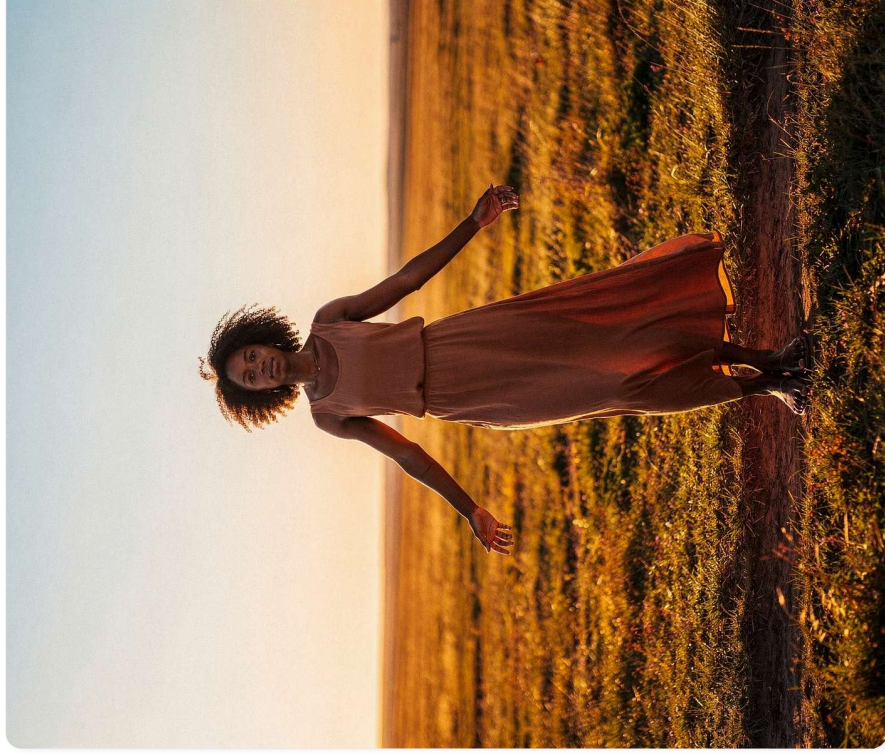
Stay tethered to your colleagues, your communities, and the deeper purpose

grounding, your humanity — practice the return. Not once, but again and again. It is a lifelong practice, not a one-time achievement.

daily, consistent. Your future clients need the version of you that rests, reflects, and replenishes.

beneath the work. Isolation amplifies exhaustion. Connection restores perspective and reminds you that you are not alone in this.

☐ The work will shake you. **Return to center.**



My Charge to You

Let it deepen your roots — not uproot your purpose.

The hard cases, the systemic failures, the sleepless nights — let them press you deeper into the ground of who you are and why you chose this work. Not shallower. Not sideways. **Deeper.** A tree that survives a storm doesn't do so by standing rigid — it does so because its roots reach further than the storm can see. **You are that tree.**



Thank You

It has been an honor to share this space and this conversation with you. Go forth — grounded, restored, and connected to the work that changes lives.

TaShun Bowden-Lewis, Esq.

The Bowden-Lewis Consulting Group

Phone

475-231-7374

Email

info@bowdenlewisgroup.com

Website

www.bowdenlewisgroup.com