

The Georgia Justice Project
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The Georgia Justice Project (GJP) is a legal nonprofit organization in Atlanta. As our website describes us, we are “an unlikely mix of lawyers, social workers and a landscaping company. GJP defends people accused of crimes and, win or lose we stand with our clients while they rebuild their lives. We believe this is the only way to break the cycle of crime and poverty.”

The work we do is not easy. In fact, many lawyers who serve those accused of crimes have become disillusioned, disheartened and disconnected from their clients. But what I have come to realize is that our approach of practicing law is a salvation. We aren't just saving our clients—we are saving a small part of our profession from a pernicious condition of the heart. We are saving ourselves from the effects of isolation, alienation, cynicism and hopelessness.

Our approach to criminal defense and rehabilitation is based on a relationship- and community-oriented ethic. A client is usually referred to the Georgia Justice Project because they have a criminal case pending and cannot afford to hire a lawyer. We accept only clients who are willing to make a serious commitment to changing their lives to ensure that they move beyond the social, emotional and personal challenges that may have contributed to their legal problems.

The legal intake assessment is only the beginning of the process. It is followed by an assessment in which social services staff meets with the client, and evaluates the client's strengths, needs and goals in light of their current legal situation. If there is a good match between client needs and our resources, the client is accepted as a probationary client for a period of four weeks, during which time he or she meets with the social service team to develop and implement an individualized treatment program. The agreements are contractual, and staff will terminate the contracts if clients are not willing to work towards improving their life and complying with their service contract.

In the United States, many criminal defense attorneys never ask their clients for the truth. In contrast, at GJP, we directly ask our clients whether they have committed the crime of which they are accused. If they tell us that they are guilty, we begin the process of helping them begin to accept responsibility for their actions and examine how they can rectify the harm that they caused to the individual and the community. If they say they are innocent, we believe our clients and advocate for their rights based on that premise.

One of the novelties of our approach is that lawyers work closely with professionals in other disciplines, which is unusual in the United States. Studies have shown that the underlying problems that brought the offender into the system—addiction, domestic unrest, mental illness, impulse control—are most successfully addressed by tapping the expertise of social workers, mental health experts, or other non-lawyer professionals. We believe that providing this “wraparound”, comprehensive set of social services is one of the most effective ways to prevent future crime.

If our clients are convicted and sent to prison, we maintain our relationship: we visit, we write, we accept collect calls, we provide emotional support for their family.

Often an initial set of legal problems has a “snowball effect” and creates a multitude of new problems for many of our clients. For this reason, once released from

prison or jail, we offer a variety of social services to our clients, including individual and group counseling, high school degree and literacy classes, monthly support dinners and employment with our landscaping company. It is not unusual for our staff members to spend time every week with clients whose legal cases have been resolved for years.

Our office is located just a few steps away from the tomb of Martin Luther King, Jr. His dream of the Beloved Community encouraged us to see our futures intertwined with those of our neighbors, and helped us move from a selfish and self-centered approach to life towards a community and relationship-oriented one. At the Georgia Justice Project, this is what we strive for in our everyday efforts, struggles and triumphs.