A Love Letter to Social Workers in the Law

By Denali Wilson

Social workers in the law have fundamentally changed how I think about legal advocacy, about my role as a lawyer, and about my relationship to clients. I represent people serving life and long sentences in prison for crimes committed as children and young adults. Criminal defense is one of many legal fields in which social workers are incorporated as critical members of the legal team, where holistic representation and multidisciplinary teams are increasingly recognized as essential to serving our clients well. I am deeply grateful for the contributions of social workers to our work. What they have offered me is not just support in difficult moments, but a different way of understanding what the work is.



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Choosing to defend people in prison is choosing to lose. A lot. In my first year of practice, my private mantra was to toughen up, to build my tolerance for loss. The solution, as I understood it, was distance. If I could keep enough space between myself and my clients, between effort and outcome, I might be able to survive this work. Distance felt like discipline. It felt like professionalism. It felt necessary.

Law school taught me to measure our legal work in wins and losses, in clear and final terms. In my line of work, that means parole granted or denied; freedom or continued imprisonment. It is a language of outcomes, of binaries.

When the value of our work is only about outcomes, then much of this work will feel like failure. At the last published measurement, in typical years in New Mexico, discretionary parole is granted in just 7% of cases.[1] Criminal defense professionals across the board face similarly steep odds. To survive the constant loss, we have to suit up and toughen up.

In the moments that tested me most – after difficult client meetings, when the path forward was unclear, in the quiet aftermath of work that threatens to break your heart over and over again – the social workers around me leaned in instead of pulling back. They invited a different, softer perspective.

I began to see that the way I had been taught to measure success was incomplete. If we understand "winning" as something else – as helping a person who has been unseen or misrepresented by systems be witnessed in their full humanity – then the measure of our work begins to change. We can "win" in how we show up. We can "win" in how we listen. We can "win" in whether a client leaves a conversation feeling more seen, more understood, more whole or healed.

This kind of "win" requires lawyers not to toughen up but to embrace our softness, our own humanness, and our capacity to feel deeply alongside our clients. This is something lawyers are not always trained, or comfortable, doing. We were trained to analyze, advocate, and solve. We were not trained to sit with uncertainty, to hold the full weight of another person's story, or to understand how our own presence shapes what is possible in that space.

Parole readiness is intended to be a measure of insight, growth, and preparedness. The evidence of those qualities is deeply human, developed through the processes of relationship, vulnerability, and connection. When we center those processes,

we are not stepping away from outcomes; we are building the conditions that make them possible. As we lean in when things are hard, so do our clients. When we show up with compassion, clients become more open, more reflective, and more willing to engage in the difficult work of processing and expressing their experiences. That depth of engagement translates into more meaningful preparation, more authentic expressions of accountability and growth, and, ultimately, more compelling presentations to decision-makers.



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These individual moments of more human-centered advocacy accumulate over time and have the potential to reshape the systems themselves. When we show up with honesty and relationality – not only with our clients, but with the boards, decision-makers, and institutions that hold their fate – we invite those systems to engage differently as well. As more complete and human stories are brought forward, there is greater space for those stories to matter. Processes evolve. Standards begin to reflect the realities they are meant to assess. What once felt rigid becomes, incrementally, more responsive.

Human-centered and evidence-based reforms to the parole system in 2021, 2023, and 2026 have incrementally improved the process. In just a few years, we have seen significant results. From a parole grant rate entrenched at around 7 percent in 2017, today, our office sees parole grant rates closer to 30 percent. We are still losing more often than we win—but the shift matters.

This was all made possible in large part thanks to the contributions of social workers in the field. Social workers have taught me to slow down, listen differently, and recognize that relationship is not secondary to the work – it is the work. These lessons have reshaped my advocacy and enabled the real changes we have together been able to bring about. Within legal systems that are disproportionately oriented to harm rather than help the people we serve, humanity itself is the best defense. In order to access that defense, we have to first access our own humanity.

So to the social workers who have worked alongside me, who have challenged and steadied me, and who have expanded my understanding of what it means to be an advocate, thank you. And to lawyers who feel hardened by this work, or burdened by its win-loss calculus, this is an invitation to see the social workers in your offices not as support staff, but as peers; not as adjacent to the work, but as essential to it. If you allow yourself to learn from them, they may not only change how you advocate but also help you find a way to remain in this work without losing the parts of yourself that brought you to it in the first place. ■

Endnotes:

[1] Jeff Proctor, Throwing Away the Key New Mexico's 30-Year Lifers Denied a Fair Shot at Parole, New Mexico InDepth (2017), available at https://nmindepth.com/2017/throwing-away-the-key-new-mexicos-30-year-lifers-denied-a-fair-shot-at-parole/



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