

Edward Barakah/Sanders, LLMSW

Founder and CEO, Alternative Sentencing & Reentry Solutions, L3C asrs4juveniles.org

This **overview** distills my core position: lived-experience experts are true experts, youth trauma fundamentally shapes behavior, and defenders must engage these experts through structured, ethical, and non-extractive practices. What follows is a legally grounded and clinically informed expansion of those ideas, framed for youth-justice audiences.

Concise Takeaway

Youth defenders can tap into lived-experience expertise by recognizing it as *professional expertise*, integrating it structurally into defense practice, and engaging experts through trauma-responsive, non-extractive methods that protect their wellbeing while strengthening advocacy for youth.

1. Why Lived-Experience Expertise Is Essential

People who have survived incarceration, juvenile court involvement, or high-ACE childhoods bring insight that traditional legal training cannot replicate. They understand:

- How trauma shapes cognition, impulse, and behavior in adolescence
- How youth interpret authority, fear, and coercion
- How institutional environments affect decision-making
- How “intent” is often misread when trauma-impacted youth are actually reacting, surviving, or compensating for unprocessed experiences

This expertise helps defenders explain to fact-finders that **every act has a "shadow"—a context—and you cannot understand the act without understanding the conditions that shaped it.** This is especially critical in cases where prosecutors attribute adult-level intent to children whose neurodevelopment and trauma histories make such intent implausible.

2. How Defenders Can Tap Into This Expertise

A. Accept lived experience as professional expertise

Do not treat lived-experience experts as storytellers or "inspirational voices." Treat them as:

- **Subject-matter experts** on trauma, incarceration, youth behavior, and system navigation
- **Cultural interpreters** who help the defense team understand youth perspectives
- **Credibility bridges** who build trust with clients who may distrust authority

This means compensating them, integrating them into team meetings, and giving them defined roles, not tokenism.

B. Use their expertise both organically and structurally

Organically: When experts share their own stories, they naturally illuminate how trauma shapes reactions, not intentions. Their narratives help defenders understand how youth process fear, threat, shame, and survival.

Structurally: Experts can be embedded into:

- Intake interviews
- Mitigation investigation
- Charging and Plea/Bargaining
- Sentencing/disposition planning
- Reentry planning

- Trial strategy discussions
- Expert testimony on prison culture, trauma responses, and adolescent development

This mirrors emerging national practice, where lived experience experts are part of consultant pools and advisory councils (e.g., OJJDP's Youth & Family Partnership Group), Improving the Juvenile Justice System with Lived Experience, and justice involved leading organizations efforts to end juveniles life without parole and other extreme sentences for children (cfsy.org).

The "No Child is Born Bad" Campaign: FJP and the CFSY partnered alongside other major legal advocacy groups for this policy lobbying initiative. The campaign operates at both the state and federal levels, leveraging legal reports and public education to shift lawmakers and prosecutors away from treating children like adults in the justice system. [1] See also: fairandjustprosecution.org

3. Recommendations for Defenders Working With Lived-Experience Experts

A. Approach with respect for expertise not extraction

Do not ask experts to "share their trauma" for the sake of inspiration or emotional impact. Instead:

- Ask for **analysis**, not **autobiography**
- Frame questions around **insight**, not **personal pain**
- Invite them to interpret youth behavior, not relive their own trauma

This aligns with guidance from national youth-justice organizations emphasizing authentic, intentional engagement.

B. Create trauma-responsive engagement practices

People with lived experience often carry high ACE scores themselves. When they share their stories, it can trigger the same trauma pathways that youth experience.

Defenders should:

- Provide clear expectations before meetings
- Allow experts to decline topics that feel unsafe
- Avoid sudden or probing questions about personal trauma
- Offer breaks, grounding techniques, and supportive debriefs
- Ensure they have control over how much they share and when

C. Build structures that prevent re-traumatization

- Use written role descriptions
- Provide supervision and peer support
- Compensate experts fairly
- Avoid last-minute requests that pressure emotional labor
- Treat their time and expertise as equal to clinicians, attorneys, and investigators

D. Protect confidentiality and boundaries

Experts should be integrated into the defense team with clear confidentiality agreements and defined communication channels. This prevents role confusion and protects both the expert and the youth.

4. How Lived Experience Expertise Strengthens Legal and Clinical Advocacy

Legal Impact

- Clarifies why “intent” is often misapplied to youth
- Provides credible alternative explanations for behavior
- Strengthens mitigation narratives
- Humanizes the client in ways attorneys alone cannot
- Helps judges understand the “shadow” behind the act context, trauma, development, and environment

Clinical Impact

- Explains trauma responses, survival behaviors, and emotional regulation challenges
- Helps defenders articulate how ACEs impair adult-level processing
- Supports recommendations for treatment, rehabilitation, and community-based alternatives
- Provides insight into reentry needs and realistic supports

5. Closing Statement

> “To work effectively with lived-experience experts, youth defenders must first recognize them as experts, not as stories. Their insight helps us explain to courts that every act has a shadow, and trauma is often the sun that casts it. When we engage these experts intentionally, ethically, and with trauma-responsive practices, we strengthen both our legal advocacy and our commitment to honoring the humanity of the youth we serve.”