

ASSEMBLY JUDICIARY COMMITTEE

STATEMENT TO

ASSEMBLY, No. 4897

STATE OF NEW JERSEY

DATED: OCTOBER 15, 2026

The Assembly Judiciary Committee reports favorably Assembly Bill No. 4897.

This bill establishes a collaborative representation model on a Statewide basis in the Office of the Public Defender, known as the New Jersey Holistic Representation Model. This model of public defender services, which is currently in operation in the Hudson, Atlantic, and Monmouth regional offices, was created in collaboration with the national nonprofit Partners for Justice.

Under a holistic representation model uses a team-based approach to provide services for each client participant. Under the bill, client participation is voluntary, but eligibility-based. Eligibility criteria would be established by the Office of the Public Defender.

Under the bill, the model consists of legal representation by a staff attorney and support services provided by professionals, who work closely with clients to address underlying issues contributing to the client's involvement in the criminal justice system. A critical member of the client team of the holistic representation model is the "client services specialist," who would be a client advocate, not acting in a clinical or supervisory capacity, but is responsible, under the general direction of a supervising attorney, for providing non-legal services to the client participant. Key to representation under a holistic representation model is the confidential nature of the attorney-client relationship, which would extend to the non-attorney members of the client team so that those non-attorney members are able to adequately perform their functions without a mandatory reporting requirement should otherwise reportable information be disclosed.

Under the bill, the non-attorney members of the client team, under the general supervision of the attorney member or supervising attorney, would be responsible for conducting assessments and connecting client participant services, programs and resources, including, but not limited to, assistance with mental health counseling, substance abuse treatment, housing support, documentation acquisition, transportation support, education services, veteran's services, family support services, employment, job training, and occupational licensing.

Under the bill, the Public Defender is to develop or approve a training course and curriculum for public defender staff on trauma-based approaches and collaborative defense practices and shall make

the curriculum available to all Office of Public Defender regional offices. This training course and curriculum is required to be reviewed at least every two years and modified as needed. The Public Defender would be responsible for ensuring that all public defender staff complete in-service training triennially on trauma-based approaches. The Office of the Public Defender is directed to establish guidelines for non-attorney advocates in the New Jersey Holistic Representation Model concerning the use of information obtained through a client's participation in the program or in obtaining non-legal assistance.

Within one year after the effective date of the bill, and annually thereafter, the Public Defender is required to report to the Legislature, the Governor, and the Supreme Court on the actions taken pursuant to the bill and provide the most recent available data on the participation and data outcomes of participation in the New Jersey Holistic Representation Model. The bill would permit the report to be combined with that of any other body, agency, or study group engaged in reviewing the administration of criminal justice. The report would include all pertinent data on the operations of the office, the costs, projected needs, and to the extent experience may indicate, recommendations for statutory changes to the holistic defense program, including changes in the criminal law or changes in court rules.