

Identifying, Diagnosing and Treating Justice-Involved Individuals with Cognitive Disorders: An Alternative Model for Criminal Justice

Noah Cox, JD
Enrique Lopez, PsyD
Diomaris Safi, PsyD

Level

Intermediate/Advanced

Room

Track

Clinical/Legal/Policy, Administration & Legislation

CE

CPA/BBS/CJER/MCLE

Bio

Noah Cox, JD a Deputy Public Defender with over 15 years of experience, obtained his JD from the University of Miami School of Law and currently serves in a trial assignment handling complex felony cases within the Los Angeles County Public Defender's Office. He leads the groundbreaking Neurocognitive Disorders Team (NDT), a pioneering unit aimed at enhancing advocacy efforts for adult clients grappling with various neurocognitive disorders such as Intellectual Disability, Autism, seizure disorders, Traumatic Brain Injury, and Dementia.

Under Noah's leadership, the NDT has garnered recognition, winning the California Public Defender Association's esteemed Program of the Year award in 2023 and the Los Angeles County Quality and Productivity Commission's Gold Eagle award in 2024. This team, the first of its kind in an indigent defense organization, endeavors to elevate awareness of neurocognitive disorders within the criminal justice system while developing tailored treatment options within the community.

Noah champions a collaborative, team-based approach to representation, where attorneys, paralegals, social workers, and other professionals work together to provide holistic defense strategies for their clients. Additionally, Noah actively integrates technological advancements into his practice to better serve his clients. He plays a pivotal role in the Office's Client Case Management System Steering Committee, offering guidance and training to Public Defender staff on effectively utilizing new technologies in criminal defense work.

Enrique Lopez, PsyD attended Occidental College from 1985-1989 (Major Psychology and Minor Spanish Literature). He obtained his graduate degrees from Pepperdine University. He holds a doctorate degree in Clinical Psychology and completed a post-doctorate fellowship in Neuropsychology with specialties in pediatric, adult, cross-cultural, and health-related issues at UCLA's Neuropsychiatric Institute and Hospital (1998-2000). After his training, he worked at Harbor-UCLA Medical Center. Enrique worked at Cedar-Sinai Medical Center in the Department of Psychiatry and Behavioral Neuroscience as a Research Neuropsychologist. He was the Head of the Psychology Section representing the Departments of Psychiatry and Behavioral Neurosciences,

Rehabilitation Medicine, Pain Center, and Neurosurgery. Enriwue is currently a core faculty for Clinical Psychology Dept. at The Chicago School – Los Angeles. He focuses his teaching and research on issues related to neuropsychology.

Diomaris Safi, PsyD a licensed psychologist specializing in neuropsychological and forensic evaluations. She is fully bilingual in English and Spanish. Diomaris has extensive experience administering neuropsychological tests, diagnosing and treating various psychological conditions, and providing training opportunities to emerging clinicians. Diomaris works with civil and criminal attorneys on state and federal cases, offering full batteries of neuropsychological assessments, client histories and case conceptualizations, family/witness interviews, and expert forensic testimony. Her areas of forensic expertise include death penalty litigation, mitigation, competency to stand trial, brain injury, and trauma-related disorders. Previously, Diomaris was the training director of a consortium of postdoctoral programs for the largest HMO in the country.

Currently, Diomaris serves as director of the UCLA Justice in Criminal Neuropsychology Program, where she teaches and supervises neuropsychology postdoctoral fellows working within the criminal justice system. She is an attending clinician in other UCLA clinics and a volunteer clinical professor in the Department of Psychiatry and Biobehavioral Sciences at the UCLA David Geffen School of Medicine. In addition, Diomaris is an APA-approved CEU provider, teaching professionals how to conduct Competency to Stand Trial evaluations for non-English-speaking individuals. Diomaris has authored or coauthored multiple peer-reviewed journal articles and book chapters and presented over 70 peer-reviewed professional presentations. Her research interests include developmental disabilities, the impact of cognitive deficits in criminal behavior, and how risk factors relate to the variability of life outcomes in immigrants.

Narrative

Over the past ten years, the California criminal justice system has made significant strides within the intersection of criminal courts and mental illness. But those justice-involved individuals who suffer from cognitive dysfunction have largely gone ignored, misunderstood, and often caught in anti-recidivism laws without ever receiving an opportunity for necessary support. From neurodevelopmental disorders such as intellectual developmental disorder and fetal alcohol spectrum disorders to neurocognitive disorders such as dementias and brain injuries, the criminal justice system has limited knowledge of diagnostic and treatment methods. Meanwhile similar disconnects occur in existing medical, treatment, and funding systems. The fragmentation creates a vortex from which impacted individuals, who suffer from impairments in basic functional abilities, cannot escape.

This presentation will highlight the innovative work done by the Los Angeles County Public Defender's Neurocognitive Disorders Team to address community goals in its work with Public Defender clients experiencing cognitive dysfunction. The program will educate about the basic systems that exist within California to support those experiencing cognitive dysfunction. It will inform forensic psychology and psychiatry professionals on ways to maximize the utility of their evaluations regardless of their specific focal area. It will teach attorneys and judges on ways to use the criminal courts to stabilize impacted individuals. And it will present a functional and cost effective systems-level model of how this is presently working in Los Angeles County.

Learning Objectives

1. Describe three primary diagnostic criteria for at least three cognitive disorders
1. Identify two barriers to correct identification, diagnosis, and treatment of justice-involved individuals with cognitive disorders
2. Compile two screening tools that can be used to assess justice involved individuals' need for further diagnostic intervention
3. Differentiate diagnostic methods for those with cognitive disorders versus those with other mental health conditions
4. Describe three treatment methods for those with primary cognitive disorders and those whose mental health conditions are impacting cognition
5. List three eligibility criteria for publicly available treatment options