FEDERAL PUBLIC DEFENDER
NORTHERN DISTRICT OF OHIO

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Assistant Federal Public Defender

Capital Habeas Unit — ***Post-Conviction Lawyer Wanted***

Office: Federal Public Defender, Northern District of Ohio

Location: Cleveland, Ohio

Salary Range: $80,138 – $197,100, depending on experience

Status: Full-time; first review on **December 14, 2026**; open until filled. **Two positions available.**

The Job

If you want to stand beside a client whose life depends on you, on the quality of your work, the painstaking investigation, the detail-oriented writing, and the zealous litigation their case demands, this job is for you. Capital Habeas work is where the promises of our Constitution are tested hardest: the right to effective counsel, to a fair trial, and to a sentence that reflects the whole person and does not sentence a person based on what happened on their worst day. Our Capital Habeas Unit keeps those promises for people who cannot afford a lawyer, whatever their race, background, or circumstances, and we do it as one team.

The Federal Public Defender for the Northern District of Ohio is hiring **two** Assistant Federal Public Defenders for our Capital Habeas Unit. The CHU provides specialized federal habeas and clemency representation to people sentenced to death by the State of Ohio. Its work brings together litigation strategy, factual investigation, mitigation development, expert assistance, and advocacy in federal courts and related proceedings.

We are looking for lawyers who wants to know the record, question what is missing, develop the facts, and keep working when the path forward is difficult. This is demanding,

consequential work. It requires intellectual rigor, independent judgment, patience, creativity, and an unwavering commitment to the client.

About the Office

Established in 1973, our office serves the Northern District of Ohio through offices in Cleveland, Akron, Youngstown, and Toledo. Our CHU was formed in 2008 and has grown to a staff of 15, including lawyers, investigators, mitigation specialists, paralegals, and support professionals.

We exist to preserve, protect, and defend the promises "We, the People" made in our Constitution, to ensure those promises reach the underserved in our communities, and to fight for equal justice under the law. We do this through zealous, independent advocacy and representation. We are direct with each other, we hold each other accountable, and we take the work — but not ourselves — seriously. We back each other up, care about each other, and take care of each other.

Our clients come from every walk of life, and so do we. We believe our advocacy is stronger when our office reflects the full range of experiences, backgrounds, and perspectives of the communities we serve. We are committed to building and sustaining a diverse and inclusive workplace — one in which every member of our team is respected, supported, and expected to contribute their best work.

The Capital Habeas Unit — What Makes This Job Different

Capital Habeas practice requires both close attention to the record and a willingness to look beyond it. Many of the most important facts in a case were never presented to a judge or jury. Finding them means reading every page, asking the next question, and working closely with investigators and mitigation specialists to learn who our client is and what happened.

We want lawyers who can master a complicated procedural history without losing sight of the person whose life is at stake. Strong writing matters. So do careful listening, sound judgment, sustained follow-through, and the ability to work with colleagues whose expertise differs from your own. This is team-based representation: you will contribute your own ideas, invite scrutiny of your work, and help colleagues make their cases stronger.

The Practice

As an Assistant Federal Public Defender in the Capital Habeas Unit, you will:

- Represent clients sentenced to death in federal habeas corpus proceedings, appeals, clemency matters, and related proceedings.
- Review and master extensive trial, appellate, and post-conviction records; reconstruct procedural histories; and identify factual and legal issues requiring further development.
- Research and litigate complex constitutional and procedural questions, including issues arising under the Antiterrorism and Effective Death Penalty Act (AEDPA) and 28 U.S.C. § 2254.
- Develop litigation strategies that account for filing deadlines, exhaustion, procedural default, standards of review, and limits on factual development.
- Draft clear, persuasive petitions, motions, and briefs for the federal district courts, the United States Court of Appeals for the Sixth Circuit, and the Supreme Court of the United States.
- Work shoulder-to-shoulder with research and writing attorneys, paralegals, investigators, and mitigation specialists to investigate claims and develop supporting evidence.
- Investigate clients' life histories and work with the team to build clemency and mitigation presentations that convey each client's humanity and circumstances.
- Prepare for and participate in evidentiary hearings, oral arguments, and clemency proceedings.
- Build trusting attorney-client relationships through regular communication, prison visits, candid advice, and respect for the client's decisions.
- Manage extensive records, investigative materials, expert reports, and competing deadlines, using modern tools, including the office's secure, locally hosted AI, to search and organize large records while verifying every fact against the source.
- Share research, strategies, and constructive feedback with colleagues, and help newer lawyers, law clerks, and interns grow.

Who We Want

The right person for this job is thoughtful, tenacious, and exacting, but also humble and easy to work with. Both halves matter. Above all, we look for three qualities:

- **You keep digging.** Nobody has to push you. You are curious about what happened, what was overlooked, and what further work may reveal; you take on the next task before you are asked; and you keep going when progress is slow. You measure your effort not by hours logged but by whether you have done everything the client's case requires.
- **You put the client and the team ahead of yourself.** You share credit, admit mistakes quickly, and invite scrutiny of your drafts and ideas. You respect the expertise of mitigation specialists, investigators, paralegals, and experts, and you are as willing to review a box of records as to argue in court.
- **You read people as well as you read a record.** You understand how your words land with a client, a grieving family member, a reluctant witness, or a colleague facing a deadline. You listen before you speak, read a room, and work professionally with opposing counsel and court personnel.

We also want:

- **Commitment.** A commitment to representing people sentenced to death with dignity, loyalty, and persistence, as a calling rather than a resume line.
- **Analytical rigor and writing.** The ability to untangle complicated records, identify substantial issues, and write clear, precise, persuasive arguments that make difficult facts and law understandable.
- **Judgment.** The ability to set priorities, weigh difficult choices, and adapt when the facts or the law change.
- **Organization.** The discipline to manage large records, long-term projects, and urgent deadlines without losing track of details.
- **Cultural fluency.** The life experience, humility, and sensitivity to connect with clients whose backgrounds may differ from your own.

Prior capital habeas experience is strongly preferred, but it is not the only path in. We welcome applicants with substantial experience in appellate litigation, post-conviction litigation, criminal defense, or other complex litigation whose work demonstrates the research, writing,

investigation, and judgment this position requires. We especially encourage applications from attorneys whose backgrounds, experiences, and perspectives are underrepresented in the capital defense bar.

Qualifications

Applicants must:

- Be a graduate of an accredited law school and a member in good standing of the bar of any state.
- Have at least three years of post-bar legal experience, including substantial litigation, appellate, or post-conviction work. Relevant judicial clerkship experience may count toward this requirement.
- Demonstrate strong legal research, analytical, and writing skills, and the ability to master extensive factual records and complicated procedural histories.
- Have experience with, or demonstrate the ability to develop proficiency in, federal habeas corpus law and procedure, including AEDPA and 28 U.S.C. § 2254.
- Communicate effectively with clients and work collaboratively with attorneys, paralegals, mitigation specialists, investigators, support staff, and experts.
- Exercise sound professional judgment and maintain a professional demeanor under pressure.
- Travel as required for client visits, investigations, court proceedings, and training.
- Familiarity with the 28 U.S.C. § 154 "Opt In" process is an asset.

Capital litigation, federal habeas, appellate advocacy, evidentiary hearing, and mitigation experience are particularly valuable. Prior jury trial experience is welcome but is not a prerequisite. Applicants must be admitted to, or willing to seek admission to, the courts required for their assigned work, including the United States District Courts for the Northern and Southern Districts of Ohio, the United States Court of Appeals for the Sixth Circuit, and the Supreme Court of the United States.

Compensation, Benefits, and Quality of Life

Salary is $80,138 to $197,100, depending on education and years of relevant experience, consistent with federal guidelines. Benefits include health, dental, vision, and life insurance; the Federal Employees Retirement System (FERS); Social Security; the Thrift Savings Plan; transit subsidy; free parking; 11 federal holidays; annual and sick leave; and eligibility for Public Service Loan Forgiveness.

How to Apply

Submit a single PDF by email that includes:

- A letter of interest of no more than two pages (see below).
- A resume.
- A completed AO 78, Application for Judicial Employment.
- A writing sample of no more than 20 pages that you wrote yourself with minimal to no edits from others — preferably a brief, petition, or motion.
- Three references.

In your letter of interest, tell us:

- Why you want to do capital habeas work, and why with our office.
- About your role in any capital, habeas, appellate, or evidentiary-hearing matters (without client-identifying or privileged details).
- Send to **ohn_employment@fd.org** using the subject line: **2026-11 CHU — Assistant Federal Public Defender**. Applications will be accepted electronically only.

First review will occur on **December 14, 2026**. The position will remain open until filled, but applicants who submit their materials by the first review date will receive preference.

Notice

The Office of the Federal Public Defender for the Northern District of Ohio is an Equal Opportunity Employer. We consider all qualified applicants without regard to race, color, religion, sex, sexual orientation, gender identity, national origin, age, disability, veteran status, or any other characteristic protected by law.

Employees are at-will and are not covered by the Civil Service Reform Act. Employment is subject to the availability of funds, successful completion of a background check, and United States citizenship or eligibility to work in the United States.