

Faculty Bios

Foundational Mitigation Training | July 25, 2024

Amy Vosburg-Casey

Co-Director of Mitigation Casework
Advancing Real Change, Inc.

For over twenty years, Amy has fought for clients in criminal and capital cases as an attorney, mitigation specialist, and investigator. She has worked at the trial, habeas, and appellate stages. She started her career as an attorney with the Georgia Justice Project in Atlanta, Georgia, providing highly effective, holistic representation to clients through the attorney-social worker team model. She was a member of the founding staff of the Georgia Capital Defender in 2005, and worked at the Georgia Appellate Practice and Educational Resource Center.

Amy has trained in restorative justice practices, including Defense-Initiated Victim Outreach (DIVO), and has participated in victim-offender mediations. Amy worked with the Capital Appellate Project in San Francisco and taught both law school and high school students in the Bay Area. She consults with capital trial teams around the country on mitigation investigation and development, and has worked as a mitigation specialist on non-capital cases. Amy earned her JD and MSW at Boston College. She is a member of the Georgia Bar.

Elizabeth Vartkessian, Ph.D

Executive Director
Advancing Real Change, Inc.

Elizabeth Vartkessian has been investigating the life histories of those facing the most severe penalties possible in the United States since 2004. She started working as a mitigation specialist in Houston, Texas at a time when it was the epicenter of capital punishment. There she learned and developed skills aimed at helping decision-makers have a full picture of her clients.

After starting a successful private practice and obtaining her Ph.D. in Law from the University of Oxford, Dr. Vartkessian and several colleagues created Advancing Real Change, Inc. (ARC) a national non-profit located in Baltimore, MD dedicated to conducting high-quality life history investigations in criminal cases. As the founding Executive Director, Dr. Vartkessian is committed to having the history of an accused at

the forefront of their criminal cases. She has worked as a mitigation specialist with defense teams in trial and post-conviction cases in state and federal jurisdictions and is an international expert on the collection and effective presentation of mitigating evidence, as well as the standard of care required by the defense in death penalty and juvenile cases.

Dr. Vartkessian's approach to investigating and presenting evidence is informed by research. She is a researcher with the Capital Jury Project (CJP), an ongoing research project sponsored by the National Science Foundation that seeks to understand how capital jurors make their sentencing decisions and whether those decisions are made in keeping with the law. The results of her research were widely cited by the American Bar Association's review of the Texas capital sentencing system. Her publications include articles in law reviews, peer review journals, and opinion pieces. Her book on mitigation and the criminal legal system, *The Deserving*, will be published by Bloomsbury U.S. and Footnote Press U.K in 2025.

In addition to having received her Ph.D. in Law from the University of Oxford, Dr. Vartkessian holds an M.S. in Comparative Social Policy from the University of Oxford and B.A.s in Philosophy and Political Science from the George Washington University, where she was a Presidential Scholar. In 2015 she was awarded the J. M. K. Innovation Prize for her efforts to bring mitigation to all areas of the criminal justice process. In 2018, the City Council of Baltimore passed a resolution praising Dr. Vartkessian's efforts to bring human dignity into the justice system. In 2024, she was listed as one of the 100 Women in Maryland in Business and Law.

Katherine Ashton

Co-Director of Mitigation Casework
Advancing Real Change, Inc.

Katherine Ashton provides direct supervision to staff in addition to working on behalf of ARC's capital and juvenile clients. Katherine has worked on capital cases in both federal and state courts, juvenile resentencing cases, and sentencing modifications for those convicted of crimes as children. Katherine joined ARC, Inc. with a background in community-based advocacy and direct service to individuals experiencing homelessness, and became involved with mitigation work during an internship with the University of Texas School of Law's Capital Punishment Clinic. She joined ARC, Inc. after receiving her Master of Science in Social Work degree (MSSW) from the University of Texas at Austin and her Master of Divinity degree (MDiv) from Austin Presbyterian Theological Seminary. Katherine is a Licensed Master Social Worker (LMSW).