

2024-2025 MITIGATION MENTORSHIP FELLOWSHIP ANNOUNCEMENT

Scharlette Holdman Mitigation Mentorship Program American Civil Liberties Union Foundation Capital Punishment Project

Mitigation specialists are an indispensable part of any competent capital defense team. We are charged with the critically important task of investigating capital defendants' life stories to demonstrate their humanity and to contextualize alleged offenses to those who make charging and sentencing determinations. Mitigation evidence is often the difference between a trial and a plea, or between an extreme sentence and an opportunity for release. Despite the undeniable importance of such evidence, there is a serious shortage of skilled, experienced mitigation specialists in many parts of the country.

ACLU's Scharlette Holdman Mitigation Mentorship Program directly addresses the gaping holes in mitigation services in the deadliest death penalty jurisdictions by providing intensive training and mentorship to a class of 8-12 fellows each year. Fellows are early to mid-career practitioners across the United States who will each be paired with a national expert in mitigation. The mitigation mentors for this year-long program will each have 10-25 years of mitigation experience on capital cases. They will provide direct, hands-on assistance, spending days at a time on the ground with the fellows as they conduct mitigation investigations in their current cases.¹ Fellows have opportunities to learn best practices and strengthen skills necessary to search for, identify, organize, develop, and present mitigation evidence. Fellows will not only improve the representation provided to their own clients, but will raise the standard of care in their respective jurisdictions and pass on their knowledge to their team members, their colleagues, and future generations of mitigation specialists.

The selected fellows and mentors will gather in person for a mitigation workshop to be held October 6-9, 2024 at a conference center near Philadelphia, PA. Thereafter, participants will be expected to attend monthly/bimonthly virtual sessions, including training presentations, panels, and discussion groups. Between program sessions, fellows are expected to meet virtually (or in-person, depending on proximity), with their mentor for one-on-one check-ins and consultation on one of their cases.

The small size of the training and mitigation cohort will promote collective learning across the class and will help foster the kinds of life-long learning relationships the program's namesake, Scharlette Holdman, built so successfully over her career. Alumni fellows are invited to attend discussion groups and some bimonthly sessions and can continue working one-on-one with

¹ Before any case information is shared, lead counsel approval is requested and confidentiality agreements will be signed by all parties. Consulting and travel for field investigation for the mentors is provided by the fellowship, at no cost to the local court or public defender agency.

their mentors as they wish after their first year in the program. This program is funded by the ACLU Capital Punishment Project and is provided at no cost to the fellows.

QUALIFICATIONS

This program is open to current mitigation specialists who have between 2 and 5 years of mitigation experience on capital cases and are currently working on capital cases. While practitioners from all death penalty jurisdictions may apply, preference will be given to applicants practicing in capital cases in the following jurisdictions: Alabama, Arkansas, Arizona, Florida, Georgia, Mississippi, Missouri, Ohio, Oklahoma, South Carolina, Tennessee, and Texas. Applicants can be working in public defender offices, mitigation/investigation offices, or in private practice.

We are looking for fellows who are driven, motivated, curious and have a burning desire to grow professionally. You should be committed to the best practices in our field and be open to feedback and evolving your craft. Fellows will be selected among many applicants so we expect fellows to attend the majority of group meetings and work to build a successful mentoring relationship in this joint effort.

HOW TO APPLY

Fellowship applicants should fill out the application form [here](#), including a prompt to upload your resume. If you have any trouble with the application form, please contact Jessica Poland at jpoland@aclu.org.

The application deadline is July 16, 2024, although applicants are encouraged to submit materials as early as possible, as decisions will be made on a rolling basis.

We value a diverse workforce and an inclusive culture. The ACLU encourages applications from all qualified individuals without regard to race, color, religion, gender, sexual orientation, gender identity or expression, age, national origin, marital status, citizenship, disability, veteran status and record of arrest or conviction. Applications are encouraged from people who have been directly impacted by the criminal legal system as well as bilingual applicants.

2024-2025 CO-DIRECTORS



ODALYS ROJAS is a mitigation specialist who works on Federal cases and assists to mitigate the outcome and the painful process of a capital case. She mentors mitigation specialists and teaches at national conferences. She worked with the ACLU-Capital Punishment Project for eleven years where the work took her to Louisiana, Alabama, Mississippi, Southern California, Florida, Tennessee, and Texas. She worked for seven years on capital trial cases at the Office of the Public Defender, in Orlando/Miami, Florida, and the Habeas Corpus Resource Center in San Francisco, California, where she worked capital post-conviction

cases. She represents foreign national clients where her work has taken her to South and Central America, Mexico, and Vietnam. She taught and lectured on mitigating cases in India and it now has become a practice in their death penalty cases. She is a graduate of Indiana University. In addition to co-directing the program, Odalys will also serve as a mentor for the 2024-2025 year.



MELANIE CARR is the founding director of SHMMP, a mitigation specialist and investigator based in Brooklyn, NY. She has worked on capital and noncapital trial and post-conviction cases across the South, Florida, Texas, and the Northeast. After graduating from Harvard in 1997 with a degree in social anthropology, she started her career as an investigator and mitigation specialist at the Louisiana Capital Assistance Center in New Orleans. In 2002, she received an Echoing Green Fellowship to establish A Fighting Chance, which expanded access to qualified investigators and mitigation specialists through aggressive

funding litigation and improved investigation and mitigation standards through training and mentoring across the Deep South. She assisted in the Mitigation Standards Project, conducting research used to develop the ABA's Supplementary Mitigation Guidelines. From 2007-2010, she worked with Scharlette Holdman, Russ Stetler, Jan Vogelsang, and other national experts in the ACLU's original Mitigation Resource Program, providing mentorship to mitigation specialists in MS, TX, GA, and VA. Her projects have included the Jena 6, CJA mega-cases, youth re-sentencing and parole advocacy, non-capital pre-sentencing and post-conviction advocacy, excessive sentencing appeals, and civil rights / class actions re school desegregation, voting rights, employment rights, and prison and juvenile detention conditions. She serves on the board of the Capital Appeals Project and is a former board member of the Promise of Justice Initiative in New Orleans. In addition to co-directing the program, Melanie will also serve as a mentor for the 2024-2025 year.

2024-2025 MENTORS



STACIE BROWN is the Mitigation Specialist with the ACLU Capital Punishment Project. Stacie's role is to develop comprehensive life stories and profiles that inform and persuade courts across the country to humanize incarcerated people facing the most severe and brutal

punishment. Utilizing mitigation information, she details death sentenced people's circumstances, history and environment to combat racism, unfair sentencing and execution. Prior to joining the ACLU-CCP, Stacie served as a Mitigation Specialist and Investigator for the Capital Habeas Unit in Philadelphia for 14 years. She is a graduate of the University of Central Florida with a B.S. in Psychology. She began her career in a clinical mental health setting in Florida then worked for many years for the State of Florida's Capital Collateral Regional Counsel for the Southern District representing death sentenced people in Florida with their post-conviction appeals. Stacie has vast experience with cases in jurisdictions across the US and in Federal court.



SAMANTHA KENNEDY is the Executive Director of Promise of Justice Initiative, a criminal defense and civil rights organization based in New Orleans. She is also an attorney and mitigation specialist. In 2011, Samantha began her career as a mitigation specialist, specializing in capital defense penalty phase development (pre federal authorization, pretrial, and post-conviction, federal and state) and “juvenile life without parole” sentencing advocacy. She obtained a Bachelor of Art degree in Sociology/Anthropology from Carleton College in 2001 and a juris doctor from Loyola University New Orleans College of Law in 2010. She is barred in Louisiana and United States Federal courts. Samantha

has extensive experience in building out a culturally competent legal strategy and narrative building rooted in thorough fieldwork. She regularly coaches budding legal professionals in the field of mitigation, and has been faculty for dozens of capital defense, mental health, and Miller/ Montgomery trainings, workshops, and conferences around the world. Her investigation and fieldwork experience has brought her throughout Europe, South Asia, the Middle East, Sub Saharan Africa, and the United States (including jurisdictions: Louisiana, Mississippi, Arizona, California, North Carolina, and Texas). In addition to mentoring, Samantha served as a co-director of SHMMP from 2021-2023.

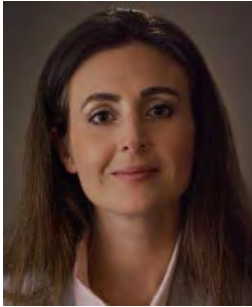


SALIMA A. PIRMOHAMED is a Texas-based capital mitigation expert in private practice. She has worked in state and federal jurisdictions around the country on the development and presentation of mitigation evidence at all phases of capital litigation from pre-trial/pre-authorization to clemency and pre-execution. She is a graduate of The University of Texas School of Law and a licensed attorney. She is committed to maintaining the highest standards of capital practice as set out in the ABA Guidelines while implementing evolving best practices. Salima has been training newcomers to the field since 2015.



MATTHEW SILVERMAN is a self-employed mitigation specialist and investigator based in Phoenix, Arizona. He obtained his BA in Cultural Anthropology in 2001 at the University of Texas at Austin. In 2006, after teaching English in Japan, Spain, and Argentina, he became a mitigation specialist while employed at the Gulf Region Advocacy Center (GRACE) in his hometown of Houston, Texas. While at GRACE, Matthew co-authored *Representing Foreign National Capital Defendants*, 42 U. Mem. L. Rev. 965 (2011-2012). He has been in private practice

since 2013 and works as a mitigation specialist, investigator, and consultant for defense teams on death penalty cases as well as Miller/Montgomery cases in various federal and state jurisdictions.



LIZ VARTKESSIAN has been investigating the life histories of those facing the most severe penalties possible in the United States since 2004 having worked in the following jurisdictions: Alabama, Arkansas, Georgia, Florida, Texas, Louisiana, Oklahoma, Pennsylvania, and South Dakota. After starting a successful private practice and obtaining her Ph.D. in Law from the University of Oxford, Liz and several colleagues created Advancing Real Change, Inc. (ARC, Inc.) a national non-profit located in Baltimore, MD dedicated to conducting high-quality life history investigations in criminal cases. She is an 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.

Special thanks to **Jessica Sutton, Lela Hubbard, Sultana Noon** and **Chris Chang**, who joined us as mentors during 2020-2023, 2022-2023, 2021-2022, and 2020-2021, respectively.