

2026

INDIGENT DEFENSE AWARD

Katy C. O'Donnell



Katy C. O'Donnell graduated *cum laude* from the University of Maryland, College Park with a *Bachelor of Arts* degree in Criminology. She received her *Juris Doctorate* from the University of Maryland School of Law where she graduated *With Honors*. Ms. O'Donnell obtained a judicial clerkship with the Circuit Court for Baltimore City where she spent a year assisting the Court with a criminal felony trial docket.

Ms. O'Donnell joined the Maryland Office of the Public Defender in 1985 and spent six years in the Baltimore County district office, primarily handling a felony trial caseload, including death penalty cases, and serving as a *Trial Team Supervisor* for other felony attorneys.

In 1991, Ms. O'Donnell joined the *Capital Defense Division* of the Public Defender's Office; a specialized unit which focused exclusively on capital and death eligible cases. During this time, Ms. O'Donnell handled numerous cases as the *attorney of record* but also had the responsibility of serving as *resource counsel* for every potential public defender death penalty case across the state. As a result, during her tenure, Ms. O'Donnell worked directly with capital trial teams on literally hundreds of cases where the State formally indicated an intention to seek a sentence of death.

In 1999, Ms. O'Donnell became the *Division Chief* of the Capital Defense Unit. The *Division* was responsible for providing instruction, consultation, support, and training on all aspects of capital representation to public defender and panel attorneys involved in capital litigation and for providing direct representation to capital clients across the state. Ms. O'Donnell was the recipient of the Office of the Public Defender's *Death Penalty Defense Award for Outstanding Advocacy* in 1998, 2003, 2005 and 2009.

In 2008, Ms. O'Donnell had the honor of serving on Governor Martin O'Malley's *Maryland Commission on Capital Punishment* as a commission member on behalf of the Office of the Public Defender. The *Commission* recommended the abolition of capital punishment in Maryland. Ms. O'Donnell testified before the Maryland legislature as a passionate advocate for repeal of the death penalty for over twenty years.

In 2009, the *Capital Defense Division* became the *Aggravated Homicide Division*, and the mission of the unit was expanded to include complex murder cases in which the State pursued a sentence of Life Without the Possibility of Parole. Ms. O'Donnell served as the *Division's Chief Attorney* in this statewide unit for approximately seven years.

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In 2013, in recognition for its role in the abolition of Maryland's death penalty, the *Aggravated Homicide Division* received both the National Alliance of Sentencing Advocates and Mitigation Specialists (NASAMS) *Mim George Award* for outstanding contributions by an organization and the Maryland OPD's *Champion of Justice Award (The Bryan Stevenson Award)* for championing legal reforms preserving the right to justice for indigent criminal defendants.

In 2016, the *Aggravated Homicide Division*, became the *Major Crimes & Complex Litigation Division*, and Ms. O'Donnell was appointed as the unit's *Chief Attorney*. Ms. O'Donnell's role was again expanded to provide instruction, training, and direct representation in homicide cases as well as other serious felonies and complex criminal prosecutions across the state applying a capital team model of representation.

In this role, in 2018, Ms. O'Donnell created a unique intensive four day *Advanced Litigation Training* curriculum designed exclusively for first chair attorneys responsible for leading a trial team in complex major felony cases. With the assistance of a superlative, experienced faculty, this training focuses on providing an integrated strategic model for complex trial preparation and promoting optimal team dynamics to maximize collaboration and shared vision in trial presentation. As a secondary component to the program, Ms. O'Donnell created a two day "*Bring Your Own Case*" session agenda where first chair attorneys bring their entire trial teams to participate in the comprehensive strategic trial preparation of their own major felony case with an expert interdisciplinary faculty team.

For over 30 years, Ms. O'Donnell has lectured extensively on both the state and national levels regarding advanced litigation skills and numerous subjects relevant to capital litigation. Ms. O'Donnell served as a faculty member of Maryland OPD's *Gideon's Promise New Attorney Training Program* since 2015 and of Maryland OPD's more recent *Jury Litigation Clinic* developed in 2024.

In 2023, Ms. O'Donnell was inducted as a *Fellow into the American College of Trial Lawyers*. She currently serves on the *ACTL National Public Defender Committee* which focuses on overriding and inclusive issues facing indigent defense organizations and practitioners nationwide and on the *ACTL Maryland State Committee* which is responsible for referring and investigating Maryland attorneys for future fellowship in the esteemed organization.

On January 1, 2026, Ms. O'Donnell retired from the Maryland Office of the Public Defender after over 40 years of service on behalf of indigent defendants facing the most serious consequences of loss of life and liberty. Today, Ms. O'Donnell is active in both state and national criminal defense work with a primary focus on elevating indigent defense practices and serving indigent clients.