Capital Habeas Unit Chief

Office: Federal Public Defender, Northern District of Ohio

Location: Cleveland, Ohio

Salary Range: $80,138 - $197,100, depending heavily on prior experience

Status: Full-time; first review on Monday, August 31, 2026, open until filled

The Office of the Federal Public Defender for the Northern District of Ohio seeks an exceptional attorney-leader to serve as Chief of its Capital Habeas Unit in Cleveland, Ohio. This is a rare opportunity to lead a highly respected capital practice at the intersection of complex litigation, institutional leadership, and public service. The next Chief will help shape the direction of one of the nation's leading capital habeas organizations while guiding a deeply committed interdisciplinary team through the legal, strategic, and human demands of life-and-death representation.

Why This Role

This position offers more than meaningful work. It offers the chance to lead in the most demanding area of public defense, to mentor excellent lawyers and professional staff, to help shape office-wide strategy, and to strengthen the integration of capital and trial defense practice across the organization.

The work is intellectually rigorous and professionally significant. It requires a leader who can navigate AEDPA, evolving and often restrictive Supreme Court doctrine, extensive factual records, expert and mitigation development, and the extraordinary weight that comes with representing people facing the finality of a death sentence.

About the Office

Established in 1973, the Office of the Federal Public Defender for the Northern District of Ohio serves our clients through branches in Cleveland, Akron, Youngstown, and Toledo. We currently have approximately 51 multidisciplinary employees across both our Trial Unit and Capital Habeas Unit.

We are committed to preserving, protecting, and defending equal justice for all through zealous, independent representation under the Criminal Justice Act. We are united by a commitment to equal justice. Guided by integrity, we serve our clients and one another with honesty, respect, and compassion. Through open communication, accountability, and professionalism, we build trust while fostering a culture that is humble, inclusive, supportive, and grounded in humanity. Together, we approach our work with diligence and resilience, while maintaining an

appropriate sense of humor in what can be grueling and difficult work. We believe that the best advocates are those whose excellence is matched by their character in service of equal justice for all.

The Cleveland-based Capital Habeas Unit, opened in 2008 with three staff members, is a growing team of 15 Assistant Federal Public Defenders, Research and Writing Specialist Attorneys, Mitigation Specialists, Investigators, and Paralegals. Our CHU is just one part of a much larger, supportive, interdisciplinary community of 22 Capital Habeas Units across the country. The selected candidate will be expected to work within that larger community to ensure our clients receive the very best representation available.

Leadership Opportunity

The Capital Habeas Unit Chief leads all Unit operations, strategic initiatives, and litigation functions while contemporaneously serving as a senior leader and personal advisor to the Federal Public Defender. The Chief must combine outstanding legal judgment with strong leadership abilities, build cohesion within the Unit and strengthen collaboration with the Trial Unit so that the office operates with greater unity, shared purpose, and institutional trust.

This role offers substantial leadership scope. The Chief will help shape Unit culture, develop and mentor attorneys and staff, guide litigation strategy in the office's most consequential cases, and work closely with the Federal Public Defender on organizational priorities, standards of excellence, and long-term institutional strength.

Core Responsibilities

The selected candidate will:

- Lead and oversee all Capital Habeas Unit operations and strategic initiatives.
- Supervise, mentor, and evaluate attorneys and professional staff.
- Foster a collaborative, inclusive, high-performing workplace culture and maintain an ethical, professional, and respectful work environment.
- Manage staffing and case assignments to ensure effective workload distribution and high-quality representation.
- Serve as lead counsel or co-counsel in complex capital habeas and related proceedings.
- Direct litigation strategy, claim development, factual investigation, mitigation efforts, and expert coordination across Unit cases.
- Review and provide strategic guidance on petitions, motions, briefs, and appellate filings.
- Advocate in hearings, oral arguments, clemency proceedings, and other high stakes matters.

- Monitor and advise on developments involving Chapter 154 "opt-in" procedures under 28 U.S.C. §§ 2261–2266, including the strategic and operational implications for Ohio capital habeas practice.
- Ensure exceptional legal analysis, writing, and advocacy at every stage of representation.
- Build and maintain effective relationships with Federal Defender offices, defense partners, experts, and the national capital habeas community.
- Promote professional development, accountability, and employee engagement.
- Advance coordination and trust between the Capital Habeas Unit and Trial Unit to reduce silos and strengthen office-wide advocacy.

Leadership Profile

The ideal candidate will bring:

- Strategic legal judgment in capital habeas litigation, including a firm grasp of AEDPA, 28 U.S.C. § 2254 practice, Chapter 154 "opt-in" issues under 28 U.S.C. §§ 2261–2266, and the ability to identify viable avenues for relief in a demanding and increasingly restrictive legal environment
- A profound appreciation for the finality of death as punishment, reflected in disciplined decision-making, intellectual honesty, and an unwavering commitment to person-centered representation.
- The maturity and presence to lead highly accomplished attorneys and staff with strong personalities, independent judgment, and longstanding client relationships.
- A leadership style that is firm, fair, candid, and respectful; one that promotes trust, accountability, and cohesion without diminishing professional autonomy.
- The ability to unify an interdisciplinary team of lawyers, mitigation specialists, investigators, and paralegals around common standards, shared mission, and collective excellence.
- A demonstrated commitment to mentorship, talent development, and the growth of less-experienced lawyers in complex post-conviction practice.
- Institutional leadership skills that support collaboration across units and reinforce shared purpose throughout the office.
- Sound judgment, resilience, initiative, and the temperament to lead effectively in high-pressure, emotionally demanding matters.

Professional Growth and National Engagement

This role is designed for an experienced lawyer who wants both impact and influence. The Chief will have the opportunity to lead major litigation, mentor and develop other advocates, help set office-wide standards, and maintain strong ties with the broader federal defender and capital habeas communities.

The position also offers meaningful professional stature, leadership within a nationally recognized area of practice, ongoing engagement with complex and consequential litigation, and the ability to contribute to the continued development of a strong institutional defense culture.

Other Qualifications

Applicants must be graduates of an accredited law school and members in good standing of any state bar. Because we occasionally litigate in state court, Ohio bar admission, or a willingness to seek admission to the Ohio Bar, is an advantage. Applicants must also be admitted to or seek admission to practice before 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.

Qualified applicants should also have:

- Experience supervising attorneys and professional staff.
- At least ten years of criminal law experience, preferably including substantial federal criminal trial, appellate, post-conviction, and capital habeas experience.
- Prior capital habeas experience or employment with another Capital Habeas Units is an advantage.
- Strong relationships within the federal defender and capital habeas communities.
- A demonstrably firm grasp of litigation under AEDPA and 28 U.S.C. § 2254.

Preferred qualifications include education, training, or practical experience in mitigation work or related fields such as mental health, sociology, psychology, childhood trauma, or social work.

Compensation, Benefits, and Quality of Life

This position offers a salary range of $80,138 to $197,100, dependent on education and years of relevant experience consistent with federal guidelines and regulations. Benefits include health, dental, vision, life insurance, the Federal Employee Retirement System (FERS), Social Security, Thrift Savings Plan, transit subsidy, free parking, 11 federal holidays, annual leave, sick leave, and Public Service Loan Forgiveness.

Cleveland and Northeast Ohio also offer an appealing quality of life for experienced professionals and families. The region combines major-league sports, a nationally respected orchestra, a renowned arts community, lakefront living, and ready access to hiking, biking, kayaking, and fishing, including the Cuyahoga Valley National Park, with a more manageable daily life and more affordable cost of living than many larger legal markets.

Application Process

Applicants should submit a single PDF by email that includes a letter of interest, resume, completed AO 78 Application for Judicial Employment, a writing sample of no more than 20 pages, and three references to ohn_employment@fd.org, using the subject line: 2026-06 Capital Habeas Unit Chief. Applications will only be accepted electronically.

First review of applications will occur on Monday, August 31, 2026. While the position will remain open until filled, applicants who submit their materials on or before the first review date will receive preference.

Notice

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. The Office of the Federal Public Defender for the Northern District of Ohio is an Equal Opportunity Employer.