

New York State Defenders Association

Discovery and Forensic Support Unit



Computer Buying Guide for Public Defense Attorneys



This guide is for attorneys buying a computer to manage digital discovery, review surveillance video, search Cellebrite reports, and handle everyday office work. Individual needs may vary, but understanding your options will help you choose equipment that makes your job easier. Check back periodically for updates.

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LAPTOP OR DESKTOP (OR BOTH)



Laptop – Great for court, jail visits, and remote work. Lightweight models are easy to carry, have good battery life, and can double as a desktop when docked (to quickly connect to screens, keyboards, and other devices). The more powerful the laptop, the heavier, louder, and more expensive it gets. There's a trade-off between size, power, and price.

Desktop – Ideal for your main workspace. Offers more power, larger screens, more storage, and easier upgrades. Desktops are more cost-effective for performance and better suited for long or intensive work sessions. Desktops tend to last longer than laptops.

Why both can make sense – A less expensive, lightweight laptop gives you mobility; a larger desktop gives you comfort and full power. If your budget allows, using both avoids compromise. A docked laptop can mimic a desktop but adds some setup hassle and cost.



GENERAL SHOPPING & TESTING TIPS



Hands-on First – Even if you intend to buy online, test laptops in person when possible. Keyboard feel, screen brightness, and weight are easier to assess in person. Some brick-and-mortar stores match online prices. Desktops are easier to buy sight unseen.

Price Timing – New models typically launch in spring and fall. Black Friday can bring 10–20% discounts on prior-year models. [CamelCamelCamel.com](https://www.camelcamelcamel.com) and other sites track price history. Electronics depreciate quickly and pricing fluctuates so be opportunistic.

First-week Checklist – Run the software you rely on, especially anything that lagged on your old machine. Test e-discovery tools, Zoom, Cellebrite Reader, and video playback. Open lots of web browser tabs and PDFs in Acrobat, all at the same time. If it's not fast enough now it never will be, so return it and try something else.

Returns & Warranties – Buy from sellers with easy return policies. Another benefit of brick-and-mortar stores is easier returns. Amazon's return policies are generally good, but vary by seller so check the policy before you buy. If you purchase an extended warranty, check what it covers and excludes.

Apple Computers – Macs work well with iPhone, Apple Watch, iPad, and other Apple devices, but they do not run Windows-only programs like proprietary surveillance video players. If you primarily use a Mac, make sure you also have access to a Windows system.



GENERAL SHOPPING & TESTING TIPS



Refurbished – You can find great deals on like-new, recent-generation desktops and laptops. If you understand the specs, return policy, warranty, and that you're taking a risk, they can handle most tasks, especially if your Cellebrite or other heavy-use needs are only occasional. Great if you use a Mac and just need a Windows machine for occasional use.

Reviews – Look up reviews before buying. If there are no solid reviews, it may be a rebranded or niche model - not necessarily bad, but less predictable. YouTube and tech sites usually cover mainstream models in detail, so you know what you're buying. Major brands release many similar models each year so verify exact model numbers. One letter off can make a big difference.

Privacy & Security – To use full-disk encryption on Windows, get the "Pro" version. Look for other security features like webcam privacy shutters, fingerprint readers, or Windows Hello IR camera (if your office allows biometrics). For travel, consider a clip-on privacy screen.

IT Departments – If you have an IT department, involve them early. They may have policies or limitations, but they're also your best allies for long-term support. Clearly explain your needs, like why a 256 GB internal drive is insufficient for big cases, or why Cellebrite can't be reliably opened over the network. Good communication now avoids headaches later.



LAPTOP BUYING POINTS



Size – 13–14" is great for daily carry; 15–16" is fine if you travel less or don't always carry a laptop; larger models are available but usually heavy and cumbersome. Larger laptops typically have more ports and better keyboards. Also consider the charger size and weight.

Screen & Resolution – Full HD (1920x1080) is standard. Higher resolutions like 2K and 4K are sharper but reduce battery life. Prioritize brightness (measured in nits) if you plan to use in well-lit rooms. Matte screens reduce glare. Image quality is subjective so test in person.

Keyboard & Trackpad – Typing comfort is critical if you plan to do a lot of writing on the laptop. Look for good key travel and responsive touchpads. Backlit keyboards are nice. Some laptops are "2-in-1", meaning their keyboard detaches or folds into tablet mode.

Memory (RAM) – Minimum 16 GB; get 32 GB if it's your main machine or you multitask heavily. Some laptops allow RAM upgrades, but many do not, so check before buying.

Processor – A current-gen Intel i5/i7 or AMD Ryzen 5/7 usually offers the best balance. Don't go too low-end (e.g., Intel i3), but you likely don't need top-tier CPUs (like i9) unless you do video editing, machine learning, or similar tasks. CPU model numbers and branding can be confusing, so focus on newer generations and real-world reviews when possible.

Battery Life – Look for 8+ hours of real-world use. Fast charging (50% in 30 minutes) is helpful. Manufacturer claims often exaggerate battery life, so check independent reviews.



LAPTOP BUYING POINTS



Ports – Preferably, at least: 1× USB-A, 1× USB-C (ideally Thunderbolt), and HDMI. Built-in HDMI is great for connecting to courtroom and office TVs. If a laptop you like is missing a port you need, or doesn't have enough, you can add more with a dongle or hub.

Storage – Aim for at least a 1 TB SSD (solid state drive; preferably NVMe, which is several times faster than SATA SSDs). Most laptops don't have a second internal drive, so plan on using external drives or cloud storage for large files. (See Storage & Backups below.)



DESKTOP BUYING POINTS



Purpose – Best for heavy workloads: reviewing discovery, large downloads, Cellebrite data, surveillance video, and multitasking. Desktops usually offer more power for less money.

Memory (RAM) – Minimum 16 GB; get 32 GB if you open lots of browser tabs or apps. Most desktops support RAM upgrades, but smaller models may have capacity limits.

Processor – Stick with current-gen Intel i5/i7 or AMD Ryzen 5/7. Desktop chips are significantly more powerful than laptop ones with the same name. Ultra-high-end CPUs are typically only needed for tasks like video editing, 3D rendering, or AI workloads.

Storage – Use a 1 TB or larger SSD (preferably NVMe) for your operating system and working files. Use a second internal or external drive for file storage and backups. (See Storage & Backups below.)

Monitors – Dual 24–27" monitors significantly improve efficiency. Look for height-adjustable stands to reduce neck and eye strain. Screen size is different from resolution. Resolution is the total number of pixels, which affects how much detail you see. 1920x1080 is sufficient, but 2K or 4K are sharper, especially on larger screens. If you watch 4K surveillance footage on a 1080p monitor, you're only seeing one-quarter of the pixels. Using multiple high-resolution monitors at the same time will require a more powerful computer.



DESKTOP BUYING POINTS



Graphics Cards – Most legal work doesn't require a "dedicated GPU" (graphics processing unit), but higher-end desktops often include one. A GPU helps with 4K video playback and multiple monitors. If you plan to use more than two screens, look for a desktop with a GPU.

Ports & Networking – Ensure you have USB-A, USB-C, and video outputs (HDMI or DisplayPort). Wired Ethernet is more stable for big downloads and backups. If you have gigabit or faster internet, consider 2.5 Gbps-capable Ethernet to take full advantage of your connection. Depending on what you're downloading or doing, you may not always notice a difference, but for large file transfers on a fast network it can save significant time. If unsure, ask your IT department because every link of your network (computer, switch, router, cables) must support 2.5 Gbps.

Size & Noise – Full-size towers stay cooler and quieter and are easier to upgrade. Small form factors save space but have fewer options and are usually less upgradeable.



STORAGE & BACKUPS



Whether you use a laptop or desktop, you'll need fast, reliable storage for active cases and secure backup options for everything else. Ideally, store your operating system and working files on one drive, and store archived data and backups on a separate drive.

Primary Storage – At least a 1 TB SSD (solid-state drive) for the operating system and your working files. Look for NVMe SSD drives, which are ultra-fast at opening and copying files.

Archiving – Use additional internal or external drives to store older or inactive cases. These can be cheaper, slower hard disk drives (HDD) because they are not accessed as often.

Backups – Use automated cloud sync services, local backups, or both. Follow a 3-2-1 strategy: three copies, two types of media, one off-site. Never rely on a single drive or device for important files because drives can fail at any time. Test backups periodically.

Cloud Storage – Convenient and affordable, but not fully under your control. Avoid using shared cloud storage for confidential information or active cases unless you fully understand the risks (searches, seizures, auto-deletion, client confidentiality, etc.).

Network-Attached Storage (NAS) – A NAS is useful for backup automation or shared access across your office. Setup and cost are higher, but it's reliable and private. NAS units are expandable so storage grows with your needs.



STORAGE & BACKUPS



Storage Media – Large flash drives and portable hard drives are necessary for sharing and moving files, but they aren't ideal for long-term storage. Some drives are much faster than others. For example, copying 100 GB might take 30-50 minutes on an old HDD but only 1-2 minutes on a fast NVMe drive. Faster storage costs more and requires a matching high-speed port. If you work with DVDs or Blu-ray discs, get an external drive that's easy to travel with. Use encryption (BitLocker on Windows, FileVault on macOS, VeraCrypt, etc.) to password-protect portable drives because they can be easily lost or stolen. Consider using multiple, smaller drives for transferring files, rather than mixing cases on a single drive.

Power & Protection – Consider a UPS (uninterruptible power supply) battery backup to protect against sudden power outages or spikes. A surge protector is a good start, but a UPS also gives you time to save work and shut down safely.

If you have questions about any of these recommendations or need help choosing a setup that fits your needs, contact NYSDA's Public Defense Backup Center Discovery and Forensic Support Unit at info@nysda.org.