

YOUTH RIGHTS IN PENNSYLVANIA: LEGAL REPRESENTATION FOR YOUTH IN CARE

Do I have a lawyer?

YES. All youth in the dependency system have a lawyer who is appointed to represent them in court at no cost. Sometimes your lawyer is called a Guardian ad Litem (GAL) or child advocate.

Your lawyer works for you. Your lawyer does not work for the county child welfare agency or for your parent(s). Your lawyer is focused on your needs, making sure you are safe and well cared for, and that your voice and opinions are heard.

What will the lawyer tell the court?

How your lawyer represents you depends on how you came into care.

- If you came into care because of your actions (like not attending school), your lawyer will tell the judge only what you want to happen.
- If you came into care because of something that your parents did or because they were not able to take care of you (like abuse or neglect), the lawyer will tell the judge what you want to happen AND what the lawyer thinks is best for you. When your lawyer acts in this way, he/she is called your Guardian ad Litem (GAL). What the lawyer believes is in your best interest may not always be what you want, but your lawyer should always explain what they will say to the court and give you an opportunity to speak for yourself if you want to. If you are not sure of your lawyer's role, call your lawyer and ask them to explain.

What is my lawyer supposed to do?

Your lawyer should come and see you as soon as possible after he or she is appointed to be your lawyer and should meet with you on a regular basis. Your lawyer should interview other people who are involved in your case and who may be witnesses in your case. Your lawyer should participate in any hearings in court that involve you. Your lawyer should also explain to you what is happening in court. The lawyer is supposed to do all of these things. Ultimately, though, you are your own best advocate. You should find out the name of your lawyer, his/her telephone number and address so you have a few ways to communicate with your lawyer. You should call your lawyer and make sure that he/she knows what is going on in your case, particularly if you are having problems. You should also be prepared to speak for yourself in court so that you can tell the judge how you feel and what you want. If you want, you can come to court with a written statement of what you want the judge to know

What should I tell my lawyer?

Almost everything you tell your lawyer is confidential. That means that your lawyer cannot tell anyone else about it without your permission. Your lawyer will tell you when she cannot keep things confidential; for instance, if you are planning to hurt yourself or others. If you want to know what you can tell your lawyer confidentially, ask your lawyer if there is any kind of information he or she would have to share.

When you talk to your lawyer about how you are doing, your placement, and your school, it makes it easier for him or her to represent you in court.

How do I find out who my lawyer is?

Ask your county child welfare agency case worker if you do not know who your lawyer is. If you are not able to find this information, you can call the [Juvenile Law Center](#) at 1-800-875-8887. If you live in Allegheny County, you can call [KidsVoice](#) at 412-391-3100.

What do I do if I think my lawyer isn't doing his or her job?

If you do not think your lawyer is doing his or her job, you should talk about this with your lawyer. If you are still not satisfied after the talk, you should contact his/her supervisor or boss. You can also tell the judge when you go to court. You should let them know what you think your lawyer is doing wrong, such as if your lawyer is not returning your calls or talking to you, not telling the judge what you want. Then the judge can decide what to do next to make sure your lawyer represents you adequately or that you get another lawyer. Your lawyer is appointed to help you and work for you. If you do not think your lawyer is doing his/her job, don't be afraid to let someone know.