

Juvenile Law Center

Fighting for the rights
and well-being of youth



STRATEGIC PLAN

January 1, 2018 - August 31, 2021

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INTRODUCTION

All too often, systems meant to serve youth fall short – and when they do, youth need zealous advocates in their corner. Founded in 1975, Juvenile Law Center is the first children’s rights public interest law firm in the country.

In 2017, we underwent a rigorous strategic planning process to identify emerging issues facing the youth and families we serve and to ensure we are using the most effective strategies to meet the needs in the field. As part of this process, we refined our mission statement to: Juvenile Law Center advocates for rights, dignity, equity, and opportunity for youth in the child welfare and justice systems.

This plan builds on areas of proven success; we will continue advocating for youth with impact litigation, appellate advocacy and amicus (friend of the court) briefs, policy reform, education and training, youth advocacy, and strategic communications. We will fight in courts and legislatures to end solitary confinement, ban juvenile life without parole, prevent youth homelessness, eliminate “aging out” of foster care, end juvenile fines and fees, and ensure educational success for system-involved youth. We will collaborate with youth advocates and rely on their expertise and insights.

We know this approach works. Our prior successes include: case law in the U.S. Supreme Court and throughout the states recognizing that youth need special protections; federal, state, and local policies that keep youth at home, protect them from harm, and help them grow into healthy adults; and a children’s rights advocacy field that increasingly relies on the voices of youth with direct experience in the child welfare and justice systems.

This plan deepens our focus on equity. Youth of color, those living in poverty, youth with disabilities, and LGBTQ youth are more likely to be pushed into the child welfare and justice systems than their peers. Research shows these disparities result from unfair treatment at multiple decision-points along the way. This plan heightens our commitment to confronting inequity and partnering with youth, families, and communities most affected by these policies.

The plan also sets forth our values which guide us to allocate resources where we can: have wide impact; shape the law; promote equity; and partner with youth, families, and everyone most affected by our work.

We have a dedicated and highly qualified staff of 24 attorneys, social workers, and paralegal, development, communications, and operations professionals who are all passionately committed to our work. Our Board of Directors provides oversight and support to make us the best possible advocates for youth. This plan is our shared

product and our shared commitment.

When children thrive, communities thrive. Together, we can stand up for rights, dignity, equity, and opportunity for youth nationwide. We appreciate your interest in our work and in our new strategic plan.

Snapshot of Our Program Goals

JUSTICE

We will fight for an end to mass incarceration of youth by challenging sentences of life without parole and the transfer of youth to adult courts. We will fight for fair treatment in all court proceedings in the justice and child welfare systems. This vision of justice is based in the commitment to rights articulated in our mission.

DIGNITY

We will advocate to ensure that youth are protected from the devastating harms of solitary confinement, pepper spray, restraints, strip searches, and separation from families.

EQUITY

We will advocate to end unfair fines and fees in the justice system. We will challenge racial and ethnic disparities and fight to ensure that youth of color, LGBTQ youth, youth with disabilities, and those living in poverty receive respect and fair treatment in child welfare and justice systems.

OPPORTUNITY

We will advocate for older youth in the child welfare system to have the supports and fair treatment they need to thrive, and the assistance they need to transition successfully to adulthood. We will work to amplify youth and community voice in reform efforts. We will advocate for successful community reentry from child welfare and justice placements.

BUILDING THE FIELD

We will support attorneys, train leaders in the field of children's rights, collaborate with pro bono attorneys, and recognize groundbreaking leadership in the field through our annual Leadership Prize.



CORE IDEOLOGY

Our Mission

Juvenile Law Center advocates for rights, dignity, equity and opportunity for youth in the child welfare and justice systems.

Our Mission Statement

Juvenile Law Center advocates for rights, dignity, equity and opportunity for youth in the child welfare and justice systems.

Founded in 1975, Juvenile Law Center is the first non-profit, public interest law firm for children in the country. Through litigation, appellate advocacy and submission of amicus (friend-of-the-court) briefs, policy reform, public education, training, consulting, and strategic communications, we fight for children who come into contact with the child welfare and justice systems. Widely published and internationally recognized as leaders in the field, Juvenile Law Center has substantially shaped the development of law and policy on behalf of youth. We strive to ensure that laws, policies, and practices affecting youth advance racial and economic equity and are rooted in research, consistent with children's unique developmental characteristics, and reflective of international human rights values.

Our Vision

A world that affirms the unique and developmentally distinct qualities of youth, guarantees fair and equitable treatment, and ensures opportunities for successful adulthood.

Our Values

These values guide all our interactions, inform our choice of work, our hiring decisions, and our staff evaluations. They serve as a touchstone for open communications in the office about our goals and our approaches.

VALUES ABOUT HOW WE WORK

We are leaders: We identify and promote new approaches, strategies, and goals in our field. We are committed to growing the field and supporting excellence throughout the legal, policy, and advocacy communities.

We are visionary: We work to shape the law to best serve youth in the child welfare and justice systems.

We are innovative: Our work is informed by other disciplines including developmental science; we think of strategies outside the box to best bring about social change; we explore developments in policy, the law, and technology to stay current on our issues.

We are committed to equity: We work to transform oppressive systems to support all youth; our work addresses structural injustice based on race, ethnicity, nationality, class, religion, gender, gender identity, gender expression, sexual orientation, and disability in child welfare and justice systems; we include strategies that are population-specific.

We value the voices of youth, family members, and community members most impacted by our work: We recognize each youth as a whole person within a family and within a community. These voices inform and influence our work. We seek opportunities to ensure that those most affected play key roles in decision-making about justice and child welfare policies and practices.

We seek wide impact: We focus primarily on work that is national in scope, or that has capacity to shape the national field or to have impact in many states. We pursue systemic change that is sustainable.

We are collaborative: We collaborate with youth, families, communities most impacted by our work, advocates, other professionals, pro bono counsel, grassroots organizations and others toward our common goals.

VALUES ABOUT CHILD WELFARE AND JUSTICE SYSTEMS

We are committed to ensuring:

- Youth remain in their families and communities; contact with the child welfare and justice systems is rare and equitably applied;
- Child welfare and justice systems help, and don't harm youth, and support healthy development for youth;
- Child welfare and justice systems address structural injustice and eliminate existing disparities based on race, ethnicity, nationality, class, religion, gender, gender identity, gender expression, sexual orientation, and disability;
- Laws, policies and practices affecting youth in the child welfare and justice systems are grounded in principles of adolescent development and other relevant research;
- The United States legal system recognizes and incorporates international human rights principles in providing greater protections to youth in the child welfare and justice systems.



PROGRAMMATIC GOALS

This section of our strategic plan focuses on our programmatic initiatives.

Goal 1: Transform the child welfare and justice systems for youth by advancing JUSTICE

KEY INITIATIVE: END MASS INCARCERATION OF YOUTH

Tens of thousands of children are incarcerated in youth prisons every day; thousands more are also locked up in adult prisons and jails. The United States is the only country in the world that permits youth to be sentenced to life without parole. Juvenile Law Center works to end mass incarceration by challenging the transfer of youth to adult court and the incarceration of youth in adult jails and prisons.

Strategies:

- (a) Eliminate juvenile life without parole in Pennsylvania by co-counseling cases,

supporting defense attorneys, coordinating state efforts, and tracking data.

(b) Eliminate juvenile life without parole by supporting attorneys nationally through litigation support and amicus efforts.

(c) Eliminate youth transfer to the adult system by supporting attorneys nationally through litigation support and amicus efforts, or otherwise ensure youth receive sufficient process prior to transfer.

KEY INITIATIVE: ENSURE FAIR PROCESSES

Since 1967, youth have had a constitutional right to counsel in juvenile proceedings, yet far too often, youth still appear without an attorney, receive ineffective assistance of counsel, or face other procedural obstacles to justice. Youth in the child welfare system don't have an equivalent constitutional right to counsel, and face even greater obstacles to fair treatment in court. Juvenile Law Center advocates for fair processes for youth in court by ensuring that legal standards are appropriate for children and by ensuring that youth have the protection of effective counsel at all proceedings.

Strategies:

(a) Advocate for a "reasonable juvenile" standard in criminal and juvenile justice cases through support to defense counsel and amicus efforts; explore whether a "reasonable black juvenile" standard can help to address racial disparities in policing.

(b) File amicus briefs and engage in litigation to protect youth due process rights and to ensure meaningful right to counsel in child welfare and justice cases.

Goal 2: Transform the child welfare and justice systems for youth by advancing DIGNITY

KEY INITIATIVE: ELIMINATE HARMFUL PRACTICES

Children in the justice system face solitary confinement, strip searches, shackling, pepper spray, restraints, and physical and sexual abuse. There is no evidence that these practices make youth facilities safer; in fact, research shows they make things worse. Youth in the child welfare system also face harmful practices in placement,

including restraints, abuse, and unnecessary psychotropic medications. Juvenile Law Center engages in litigation, policy advocacy, and public education to end these harmful practices in the justice and child welfare systems.

Strategies:

- (a) Engage in litigation, amicus support, and policy advocacy to eliminate solitary confinement, strip searches, and other harmful practices and to ensure developmentally appropriate and trauma-informed responses to youth.
- (b) Collaborate and coordinate with community organizations serving youth to use conditions advocacy to support broader deincarceration and race equity goals.
- (c) Address conditions for youth in child welfare congregate care placement.

Goal 3: Transform the child welfare and justice systems for youth by advancing EQUITY

KEY INITIATIVE: ADVOCATE FOR ECONOMIC JUSTICE

The juvenile justice system imposes numerous fines and fees on youth and their families. Inability to pay these fines and fees can lead youth deeper into the justice system, and families deeper into poverty. Fines and fees create a system of justice by income, where wealthier teenagers receive treatment while youth in poverty face juvenile delinquency petitions, incarceration, and extended probation. Juvenile Law Center engages in litigation, policy advocacy, and public education to end juvenile fines and fees.

Strategies:

- (a) Legal advocacy to challenge unfair costs, fines, and fees in the juvenile justice system through impact litigation or appellate advocacy.
- (b) State and local policy advocacy to eliminate unfair costs, fines, and fees, in the juvenile justice system in collaboration with youth, family members, and communities most affected.
- (c) National campaign to end fines and fees in collaboration with Berkeley Policy and Advocacy Clinic.
- (d) Issue reports highlighting legal strategy and youth voice; and engage in public

education and training of the defense bar.

(e) Develop legal strategies and communications strategies to address racial inequities in juvenile costs and fees.

KEY INITIATIVE: ADVANCE RACIAL JUSTICE AND PROMOTE EQUITY

Youth of color, those living in poverty, youth with disabilities, and LGBTQ youth are dramatically more likely to be brought into the child welfare and justice systems – and to go deeper into these systems and be harmed by harsh conditions – than their counterparts. These disparities result from unfair treatment at multiple decision-points in the justice and welfare systems. Juvenile Law Center engages in policy advocacy and litigation to fight for equitable systems for youth.

Strategies:

(a) Review project selection policies to ensure that our values are embedded in our decision-making.

(b) Establish and begin implementing a plan to develop more explicit racial justice advocacy strategies for our litigation and policy advocacy.

(c) Consider disabilities law and the unique needs of youth with disabilities in decisions about policy and litigation strategy.

(d) Collaborate with external partners to ensure that the needs of LGBTQ youth are met

Goal 4: Transform the child welfare and justice systems for youth by advancing OPPORTUNITY

KEY INITIATIVE: SUPPORT YOUTH IN SUCCESSFUL TRANSITIONS TO ADULTHOOD

Youth in the justice and child welfare systems deserve care and support, as well as high quality education, health care, and housing. Like all teens, they need support that extends beyond their eighteenth birthday. Juvenile Law Center advocates for policies that prioritize reuniting youth with their families or, when that fails, finding permanent, supportive family-like connections for older youth. We also work

to ensure that youth have the education, health care, and housing they need to transition successfully to adulthood.

Strategies:

- (a) Advocate for normalcy, permanency, and extended care for youth in the child welfare systems through state and local policy advocacy.
- (b) Advocate for law and policy that provides high quality transition planning.
- (c) Prevent homelessness for youth exiting child welfare juvenile justice systems through state and local policy advocacy.
- (d) Advocate for quality community-based, uninterrupted and trauma-informed education for youth in child welfare and juvenile justice systems by convening stakeholders, sharing information, and, when appropriate, engaging in policy or litigation.

KEY INITIATIVE: SUPPORT SUCCESSFUL REENTRY FROM THE CHILD WELFARE CONGREGATE CARE SETTINGS AND THE JUVENILE AND CRIMINAL JUSTICE SYSTEMS

Juvenile records and sex offender registries create long-term barriers to youth education, employment, and participation in the community, creating devastating long-term consequences for youth. In addition, youth in both child welfare and justice placements face serious obstacles to re-enrolling in school upon their return to the community. Juvenile Law Center advocates for policies that support successful reentry for youth exiting the justice and child welfare systems, with a focus on legal challenges to sex offender registries, policy reforms to ensure that young people can seek expungement for juvenile records, and advocacy for high quality education for youth in and returning from placement.

Strategies:

- (a) Advocate for records confidentiality and expungement.
- (b) Litigate to challenge the constitutionality of juvenile sex offender registration and notification.
- (c) Advocate for quality education and successful re-entry for youth in child welfare congregate care settings or the justice system or by convening stakeholders, sharing information, and when appropriate engaging in policy advocacy or litigation.

KEY INITIATIVE: AMPLIFY YOUTH AND COMMUNITY VOICE

Young people are experts on their own lives. Their lived experiences are invaluable to informing the policies that affect them. Juvenile Law Center operates two Youth

Advocacy programs – Juveniles for Justice and Youth Fostering Change – with this in mind. Juvenile Law Center also seeks the input and participation of community members affected by the juvenile justice and child welfare systems through collaborative relationships and by lifting up diverse community voices in media and communications.

Strategies:

- (a) Enhance and begin to promote the Youth Advocacy programs as a national model
- (b) Engage in policy advocacy externally and inform our own advocacy decisions in other substantive areas through our own youth programs – Juveniles for Justice, Youth Fostering Change, and Youth Speakers Bureau.
- (c) Enhance our collaborations with Youth Speakers’ Bureau in local, state, and national presentations, media outreach, and policy advocacy.
- (d) Work in collaboration and/or coordination with youth, parents, and communities in our legal and policy advocacy.
- (e) Lift up the voices of youth and affected communities through our media opportunities.

Goal 5: Transform the child welfare and justice systems for youth by BUILDING THE FIELD

KEY INITIATIVE: SUPPORT ATTORNEYS

Attorneys for children play a key role in ensuring that Juvenile Law Center’s goals for youth – justice, dignity, equity, and opportunity – become a reality. To this end, Juvenile Law Center supports attorneys nationally advocating for youth, weighs in on cutting edge legal issues through amicus briefs, and shares our specialized knowledge of the law through publications, presentations, and the development of networks of effective advocates.

Strategies:

- (a) Provide technical assistance, support, and advice for children’s attorneys nationally in the development of effective arguments on behalf of youth in the child welfare and justice systems.

- (b) Support the field through amicus briefs.
- (c) Draft briefs and motions for use in the field.
- (d) Strengthen Juvenile Law Center alumni network by creating opportunities for alumni to meet and to share ideas and insights.

KEY INITIATIVE: TRAIN LEADERS IN THE FIELD OF CHILDREN'S RIGHTS

Juvenile Law Center is committed not only to shaping the law today, but to ensuring that the field of children's rights continues to grow. Juvenile Law Center's fellowship and internship programs are designed to build leaders in the field.

Strategies:

- (a) Continue supporting Zubrow Fellows to train emerging leaders in the field of children's rights.
- (b) Diversify the field by making paid internships available to summer interns to allow a broader spectrum of young attorneys, social workers, paralegals, and others to receive training in children's rights.
- (c) Host national and international fellows to learn from their expertise, and to share Juvenile Law Center's expertise nationally and internationally.

KEY INITIATIVE: COLLABORATE WITH PRO BONO ATTORNEYS

Juvenile Law Center works to leverage our own resources by connecting with highly experienced pro bono attorneys across the country and collaborating with them on litigation, policy, and research projects aimed at reforming the justice and child welfare systems.

Strategies:

- (a) Build relationships with pro bono offices of Philadelphia-based and national law firms and educate them about Juvenile Law Center's work.
- (b) Develop research projects that advance Juvenile Law Center's mission and project areas and train and supervise pro bono attorneys in completing the projects.
- (c) Encourage pro bono attorneys to advocate for vulnerable youth and support youth advocacy in their personal and professional capacities.

KEY INITIATIVE: AWARD ANNUAL LEADERSHIP PRIZE

Juvenile Law Center's annual Leadership Prize is awarded to outstanding advocates working to advance the rights and well-being of youth in the child welfare and

justice systems. Recipients of the Leadership Prize are leading lights in the field whose inspirational careers have served as beacons for the next generation of advocates. Their work has substantially improved the lives of our most vulnerable youth. Juvenile Law Center awards the prize to advocates who have changed the field of children's rights through a lifetime of work on behalf of youth in the child welfare or justice systems or through a landmark contribution with enduring significance.

Strategies:

- (a) Highlight excellence in the field of children's law by seeking diverse nominees and publicizing their work on behalf of youth.
- (b) Create major annual event recognizing the winners.