



# JUVENILE LAW CENTER

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STRATEGIC PLAN  
2022-2024

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Juvenile Law Center  
Fighting for the rights  
and well-being of youth

# JUVENILE LAW CENTER STRATEGIC PLAN 2022-2024

Juvenile Law Center  
1800 JFK Blvd, Suite #1900B  
Philadelphia, PA 19103

For more information about  
Juvenile Law Center's work,  
visit [www.jlc.org](http://www.jlc.org).

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# I. OUR MISSION, VISION, VALUES & APPROACHES

## A. OUR MISSION

Juvenile Law Center fights for rights, dignity, equity, and opportunity for youth. We work to reduce the harm of the child welfare and justice systems, limit their reach, and ultimately abolish them so all young people can thrive.

## B. OUR VISION

An anti-racist world that treats children like children and allows them to thrive in their families and communities.

### A NOTE ON LANGUAGE:

Juvenile Law Center is committed to using language that centers youth and conveys respect for every individual. One of our first tasks under this new plan will be to examine the language we use to describe the state systems involving youth and the terms we use to talk about young people. This will also require us to reconsider our own name. We recognize that the term “juvenile” has negative connotations and fails to represent young people respectfully or holistically. We also recognize that the terms “justice” or “child welfare” may cast these systems in a positive light when the experiences of youth are typically just the opposite. In updating our language, we will collaborate with the young people most impacted by these decisions, including young people in our Youth Advocacy Program. In the current plan, and until we conduct this review, we use the terms “child welfare,” “justice,” and “juvenile justice” for clarity about the parameters of our work.





## C. OUR VALUES

### 1. Values about how we work

Our shared values guide all of our interactions, inform our choice of work, our hiring decisions, and how we measure success individually and collectively. They serve as a touchstone for open communications in the office about our goals and our approaches. We will hold ourselves accountable to these values by measuring our progress at least annually.

We are committed to:

**Collaborating** with diverse stakeholders, including youth, families, communities most impacted by our work, advocates, other professionals, pro bono counsel, grassroots organizations, and others toward our common goals.

**Elevating the voices of youth, family members, and community members most impacted by our work** and recognizing each youth as an individual within a family and within a community. These voices inform and influence our work. We seek to maximize the decision-making role of those most affected by justice and child welfare policies and practices. We bring humility to our role, recognizing how our own understanding of the systems in which we work comes from people with lived experience of these systems.

**Fighting for equity** in the policies impacting youth. We work to transform unjust systems to support all youth. Our work addresses structural injustice based on race, ethnicity, nationality, immigration status, class, religion, gender identity, gender expression, sexual orientation, and disability in child welfare and justice systems. We include strategies that are population specific.

**Innovating** by developing new strategies to best bring about social change. We work in a cross-disciplinary fashion to incorporate the latest developments in law, developmental science, and social policy in our work; and responding to the expertise of Black, Latinx, and Indigenous community groups, scholars, and reformers, including those with lived experience with the justice and child welfare systems.

**Recognizing the strengths and limitations of our disciplines.** We seek to use law and social work to support youth in their families and keep them out of the child welfare and justice systems. Recognizing both the power of these tools and the oppressive histories and impact of the disciplines, we reflect on our strategies and our roles to best meet our goals.

**Seeking wide impact** by focusing primarily on work that is statewide or national in scope, and that will shape the field of youth law and policy. We pursue systemic change that is sustainable.

**Sharing our expertise** with advocates across multiple disciplines to promote policies to keep youth with families and out of the child welfare and justice systems.

**Growing the field** by identifying and promoting new approaches, strategies, and goals in legal advocacy, policy advocacy, and youth-led advocacy, and by providing the resources and support to develop leaders and support excellence within our office and throughout the field.

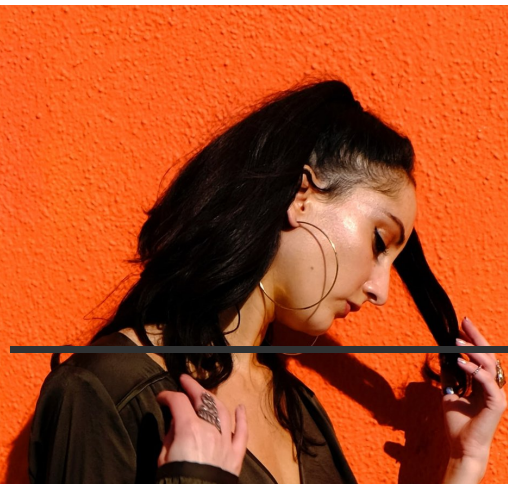
## 2. Values about our office environment

We are committed to:

*Valuing each member of our team* by creating a work environment where all staff members, youth advocates, and interns are supported in doing their best work, have ongoing opportunities for growth and development, and are consistently nurtured to reach their potential and compensated for their work. We will continue to seek out information and develop policies to create a trauma-informed workplace.

*Valuing personal perspectives and lived experiences.* We will value diversity of race, ethnicity, nationality, immigration status, class, religion, gender identity, gender expression, sexual orientation, system experience, and abilities among staff, youth advocates, interns, volunteers, clients, Board members, and others with whom we work.

*Transparency about the power each of us holds,* who makes decisions, and the path to greater leadership and authority within the organization. We will default to transparency, and when we believe we can't be transparent, we will explain why. We encourage questions and constructive criticism of our policies and practices.





**Collaboration** with each other and with external partners. We commit to asking questions, seeking out help, and offering guidance in a supportive environment.

**Open-mindedness**, respecting differing points of view, and creating an environment where people can disagree. We will make space for everyone to have a voice and share it; we will be resilient and open to change.

**Growth**, including seeking opportunities for individuals to grow and developing collectively as an organization through ongoing education.

**Diversity**, including increasing diversity in our staff, interns, management, and board positions, and recognizing that the strength that comes from our diverse backgrounds and experiences.

**Equity and inclusion** in our language, policies, and practices. We will encourage staff, youth advocates, and board members to voice concerns and share ideas and we will continue to educate ourselves on bias, inclusive language, and equity. We will offer and receive feedback around our treatment of one another with a spirit of generosity and curiosity.

**Balance and wellbeing.** We will create policies to promote a healthy work-life balance, to support the individual wellbeing of each staff member, and to work as a team to assist each other in meeting deadlines and completing work effectively.

**Dedication to our work**, consistently holding ourselves to high standards in the interest of achieving our goals for youth.





## D. OUR APPROACHES

Juvenile Law Center uses multiple approaches to accomplish our ends: legal advocacy, policy advocacy, youth-led advocacy, and strategic communications. Our strategies are interconnected. We pair impact litigation with policy advocacy and community organizing to push for lasting and transformative change. Our policy agenda is informed by—and often conducted in collaboration with—youth, family members, and grassroots partners. Our youth advocacy campaigns respond to legal and policy opportunities in the field. In all of our work, we seek out strategic communications opportunities to enhance the work and to shape public opinion. We seek opportunities across the country to work where we can respond to identified needs in the community, build on local partnerships, leverage legislative and legal reform opportunities and create momentum for change.





# I. CONTEXT

## A. The History of Inequity in the Child Welfare and Justice Systems

Today's inequities in the child welfare and justice systems are rooted in cruel and discriminatory practices that date back to slavery and have been reinforced decade after decade.<sup>1</sup> While these systems have always purported to help children, in reality they have created mechanisms of social control, paternalism, and family separation that entrench hierarchy on the basis of race, ethnicity, nationality, immigration status, class, religion, gender identity, gender expression, sexual orientation, and disability. The results are systems that consistently fail youth of all backgrounds, but disproportionately harm youth already marginalized by society. This history calls for a bold rethinking of our field, requiring us to dismantle systems of state-imposed harm and build new approaches that allow young people to thrive in their families and communities.

During slavery, Black children were ripped from their families and subjected to abuse and trauma.

In the years after the Civil War, the evolution from slavery to Black Codes and convict leasing criminalized freedom for Black youth, and widespread lynching created a reign of racial terror. The first juvenile courts, established in this context, reflected the dehumanization and devaluation of Black lives. Early youth correctional facilities and orphanages reinforced these disparities, excluding Black children from services provided to those who were white. The Court system instead disproportionately placed Black children in adult prisons, with harsh conditions and longer sentences.

The early juvenile court system was also rife with other forms of discrimination. Non-English speakers, disabled youth, and LGBTQ+ youth were labeled as "feeble-minded," pulled into the court system, and incarcerated. Indigenous youth were torn from their homes and families and taken to boarding schools where they were subjected to cultural genocide and faced brutal conditions, physical and sexual abuse and murder of students.

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<sup>1</sup> We are indebted to James Bell and Dorothy Roberts, along with many other scholars and activists, for their groundbreaking work on disparities in the justice and child welfare system, which has informed our understanding of the structural nature of the problem we face and the solutions we must seek out.



Economic injustice heightened the disparities. Black, Latinx and Indigenous families and other families of color<sup>2</sup> faced and continue to face overwhelming—and intentional—obstacles to financial security: redlining in the housing industry, barriers to high quality education, and job discrimination. Courts deem parents who struggle financially to be “unsuitable,” removing children from their parents’ care—and shifting funds that could otherwise have supported families and communities into congregate care and foster care placements.

Decades of reform efforts have failed to create the safe, equitable, and supportive system that youth deserve. Still today, Black, Indigenous, and Latinx and many other youth of color face arrest, prosecution, and placement in justice facilities, as well as removal and placement in foster care and group homes, at dramatically higher rates than their white peers. Far too often, these placements then inflict the additional trauma of physical, sexual, and emotional violence, solitary confinement, shackling, pepper spray, and numerous other harms. These systems perpetuate cycles of

family separation and trauma rooted in the history of our country. This is true across the country; the problem is particularly acute in Pennsylvania.

Youth with disabilities and those who identify as LGBTQ+ or gender non-conforming also face a heightened risk of involvement in both systems. LGBTQ+ youth, for example, constitute five to seven percent of the nation’s overall youth population, but they make up 13 to 15 percent of those in the juvenile justice system. Research indicates that the prevalence of youth with disabilities in juvenile justice placements is four to five times greater than the prevalence of youth with disabilities in public schools; any reforms must therefore take into account the intersectional identities of youth.

And while the numbers of youth pulled into the child welfare and justice system and held in congregate care and youth prisons have decreased, these practices are still all too common. Too many young people are separated from their families. Too many face physical and sexual abuse, solitary confinement, pepper spray, restraints, and even death at the hands of the state.

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<sup>2</sup> Nationally, Black, Latinx, and Indigenous youth are pulled into the child welfare and justice systems at much higher rates than their white peers and Asian American youth are involved in the justice and child welfare less than their white peers. Specific groups of Asian or Asian American youth, however, also face discrimination resulting in higher levels of system involvement, and these disparities may be particularly pronounced in some regions of the country. We use the phrase “Black, Latinx, Indigenous, and other youth of color” to signal this complexity. We have chosen to use the term “Black” rather than “African American” in consultation with staff and peer organizations advocating for racial justice, recognizing that the term conveys both a sense of collective identity as well as an inclusivity to those who may have immigrated to the United States from Caribbean nations or arrived more recently from Africa.



## B. The Current Context

In the past year, issues of excessive surveillance, over-policing, family separation, and confinement of Black, Latinx, Indigenous, and other youth of color that are intrinsic to the foundation of our country have risen in prominence in public debate. Movements led primarily by Black, Latinx, and Indigenous advocates to abolish harmful and racist systems and set forth a new and positive vision for supportive social structures are also gaining traction in public debate and public policy.

Meanwhile the pandemic has highlighted a devastating reality: while we saw dramatic decreases in the number of youth incarcerated, racial disparities increased even beyond pre-pandemic levels. These changes require us to develop new approaches to social change that directly confront the discrimination that has become part and parcel of our so-called “child-serving” systems and to recognize that all youth deserve to grow up in safe and loving homes, and all communities deserve access to the resources they need to help youth thrive.

We also face a changing political landscape. After many years of U.S. Supreme Court case law recognizing that developmental differences between youth and adults require distinct legal standards, such outcomes have become less certain with Today’s Court. At the same time, state and local governments are more divided than ever before. While some jurisdictions have begun rethinking policing and mass incarceration to better support equity and develop less punitive and more logical responses to human behavior, others are banning even straightforward education in public schools about race and racial disparities and promoting increased policing to address social unrest. Our plan responds to these obstacles and opportunities.







## **II. OUR STRATEGIC PRIORITIES**

### **A. Priorities for our Substantive Work**

**To address the deep harm and structural disparities of the child welfare and justice systems, we work to limit the reach of, and ultimately abolish these systems to direct resources instead to youth, families and communities. Because youth still face immediate harm in these systems, we also engage in harm-reduction efforts.**

**Creating this balance will require nuanced decision-making as we endeavor to ensure that our short-term efforts to protect young people from harm don't build up the very systems we aim to replace. To support effective decision-making on these issues, we will rely on the input of individuals directly impacted by these systems and use strategies that explicitly confront racism and discrimination. We also continue to work for laws, policies, and practices affecting youth in the child welfare and justice systems to be grounded in principles of adolescent development, human rights, and individual dignity, and to ensure that state systems are accountable to community members with the most at stake, including youth in the child welfare and justice system and their family members.**





## 1. Strategic priority: Keep youth out of the child welfare and justice systems

**Key initiative:** Advocate for decriminalization, including categorically excluding youth under a certain age or for designated offenses from the juvenile justice system, and attacking racial bias in system involvement.

**Key initiative:** Develop and implement new strategies to prevent referrals to juvenile court and to reduce racial and economic disparities, such as keeping preventing municipal court involvement and prohibiting transfers from municipal to juvenile court.

**Key initiative:** Advocate for procedural protections during police encounters and right to counsel in court, including using legal arguments that are youth- and race-specific.

**Key initiative:** Publish, present, and provide technical assistance to share these strategies nationally.

## 2. Strategic priority: Keep youth out of the adult criminal justice system

**Key initiative:** Challenge mandatory and discretionary transfer, with a focus on racial impact of transfer laws.

**Key initiative:** Advocate for a meaningful right to parole for youth in the adult system.

### 3. Strategic priority: Keep youth in their homes and communities

**Key initiative:** Advocate for decarceration, including advocating for equity goals and ensuring youth and family involvement in reforms.

**Key initiative:** Dedicate staff, including a new attorney with child welfare expertise, to develop new strategies to abolish congregate care, confront racial disparities in placement, and invest in youth, families and communities, including exploring the possibility of eliminating the requirement of child welfare system involvement for key services and supports.

### 4. Strategic priority: Reduce harm

**Key initiative:** Fight harmful conditions of confinement.

**Key initiative:** Abolish fines and fees in the justice system and expand work to research and begin advocacy on child welfare fees.

**Key initiative:** End juvenile sex offender registration and community notification.

**Key initiative:** Limit collateral consequences, including advocating for record sealing and expungement.

**Key initiative:** End harsh and extreme sentences for youth and young adults in the criminal justice system.





## 5. Strategic priority: Imagine the future

**Key initiative:** Establish strategic partnerships with community-based groups, academics, and other leaders in the field of abolition to connect our legal and policy work with ongoing efforts to create alternatives to the child welfare and justice systems and to move beyond systems of policing, incarceration, and institutionalization.

**Key initiative:** Develop strategic communications to change hearts and minds to support the abolition of our current harmful system and the possibility of new and better alternatives.

**Key initiative:** Engage in a discovery process, including interviews, listening sessions, and other research to determine whether we want to develop a new area of our work focusing on alternatives to our current system, and if so, what direction that work should take. This new area could rely more on policy reform, storytelling, youth input, and other strategies to help shape a new vision.



## B. Priorities for our Infrastructure

We are committed to ensuring that our internal operations reflect our organizational values, including our commitment to equity and inclusion. We acknowledge that wealth in the United States is disproportionately centered in white communities and that poverty is highest in Black, Latinx, and Indigenous communities and other communities of color due to systemic racism and decades of disenfranchisement. This impacts our development strategies, our office infrastructure, and our strategic communications. Our strategies aim to deliberately identify and root out disparities as we create an inclusive and effective office for all staff members.

### 1. Strategic priority: Grow the financial resources of the organization in alignment with our mission, vision, and values, with transparency and a commitment to equity

**Key initiative:** Expand, grow, and engage our funder base in alignment with our project work, specifically focusing on funders who are motivated to fight racial inequity.

**Key initiative:** Obtain single and multi-year grants from regional and major national foundations supporting child welfare and justice reform.

**Key initiative:** Increase message-driven fundraising campaigns and align our marketing and communications work more closely to our fundraising strategies.

**Key initiative:** Build sustained planned giving and support through legacy giving.

**Key initiative:** Present a Leadership Prize each year and host an annual celebration with

national recognition and significant fundraising from a full range of funders, broadening inclusivity and engagement while breaking down traditional major event barriers that prioritize corporate cultural norms, encourage white savior overtones, and limit fuller participation and comfort for guests of all incomes, backgrounds and professional or lived experiences.

**Key initiative:** Increase annual individual giving to a sustainable level equal to or greater than \$1 million by our 50th anniversary (2025).

**Key initiative:** Maintain and fulfill fundraising best practices in line with our deeply held values in all we do and ensure sound financial management, policies and processes.



## 2. Strategic Priority: Engage in strategic communications to enhance Juvenile Law Center's national profile, elevate the organization's child welfare and justice work, and promote our broader goals for systems change

**Key initiative:** Further expand strategic communications to build empathy for youth with system involvement.

**Key initiative:** Create and implement a plan to incorporate our abolition framework into public facing messaging through anti-racist and intersectional lenses.

**Key initiative:** Review our use of language, our internal style guide and our organization's name to ensure the terms we use are culturally responsive and respectful of the communities we serve.

**Key initiative:** Enhance Juvenile Law Center's website as a tool for broader advocate involvement and engagement, including impacted communities, decision-makers, community partners, attorneys, media, and other stakeholders.

**Key initiative:** Expand staff, Board, and youth advocate media training to further build upon and increase our storytelling and knowledge sharing capacity.

**Key initiative:** Broaden and deepen equity within our strategic communications, both externally and internally, and use our communications platforms to extend the reach of advocates and partners in our field.







### 3. Strategic Priority: Strengthen youth leadership and partnerships

**Key initiative:** Maintain youth-focused programming, including ongoing recruitment and retention.

**Key initiative:** Engage in speaking engagements with key stakeholders, with involvement of staff, current members, and alumni.

**Key initiative:** Support skill development of program members, including advocacy, collaboration, and speaking skills.

**Key initiative:** Enhance partnerships with external stakeholders to support youth advocates' access to education and career opportunities.

**Key initiative:** Provide individualized supports, either directly or through external partners, to increase youth stability and wellbeing and to free them up to advocate effectively.

**Key initiative:** Engage in annual campaigns that align with and inform Juvenile Law Center strategic goals and policy advocacy.

**Key initiative:** Enhance youth involvement and further develop structures of youth collaboration with departments, including partnership with our youth advocates and with youth outside the organization.

**Key initiative:** Engage in collaborative work with program departments and external partners toward policy change on shared goals.

**Key initiative:** Expand national presence, networks, resources, and information sharing.

**Key initiative:** Optimize structure and effectiveness and enhance sustainability of the youth advocacy team.

## 4. Strategic Priority: Center Equity and Inclusion in the Organization

**Key initiative:** Strengthen equity in hiring, retention, and promotion including policies and procedures for hiring, updating performance expectations with a focus on equitable advancement, ensuring equitable compensation, and creating opportunities for power-sharing and leadership.

**Key initiative:** Ensure inclusive work environment committed to equity by developing internal expertise in diversity equity and inclusion, developing, sharing, and updating a transparent decision-making rubric, and creating systems to assess and improve our office culture.

**Key Initiative:** Enhance expertise on equity in substantive work by enhancing onboarding and staff training and creating and implementing accountability structures for our ongoing work.

**Key initiative:** Enhance diversity and inclusion in board membership and leadership through ongoing engagement, board governance skill development, and annual evaluation.





## 5. Strategic Priority: Enhance internal operational infrastructure to support current and future programs and initiatives

**Key initiative:** Further strengthen internal policies, accountability structures, workplace design, and internal communications approaches to ensure effective office operations.

**Key initiative:** Restructure legal and policy work into departments, shifting from project teams to allow for deeper expertise and greater efficiency and enhance structures of collaboration between departments and the Youth Advocacy Program.

**Key initiative:** Enhance reach and effectiveness of paralegal team by identifying and implementing new technology, supporting legal team's outreach

to expertise in racial equity arguments, exploring additional support to the organization's policy work, and streamlining and enhancing amicus brief processes.

**Key initiative:** Implement and maximize competitive technology solutions, including litigation management solutions that support strategic priorities, manage legal advocacy work, increase department efficiency and capacity, and expand accessibility of litigation data.

**Key initiative:** Enhance role of Board in achieving the goals and initiatives of the strategic plan.





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