

JUVENILE LAW CENTER

STRATEGIC PLAN
2021-2026

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Celebrating 50
Years Leading
the Fight for
Children's Rights
**Juvenile
Law Center**
50 years

JUVENILE LAW CENTER STRATEGIC PLAN 2021-2026

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For more information about
Juvenile Law Center's work,
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Juvenile Law Center
Fighting for the rights
and well-being of youth

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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.¹ 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.

¹ 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 color² 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.

² 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

This section was updated in Fall 2024 in recognition of 1) an upcoming leadership transition; 2) a desire to better clarify how our harm reduction work coexists and interacts with our abolition work; and 3) our current staff resources and capacity. To that end, we have refreshed our strategic priorities and extended our current strategic plan until 2026. Additionally, in the years since we released the original plan, we have shifted our language to further center youth and convey respect for every individual. We recognize that the term “juvenile” has negative connotations and fails to represent young people respectfully or holistically. We do not use this term in describing young people; we also recognize this will also require us to reconsider our own name. In addition, because the terms “justice” or “child welfare” may cast these systems in a positive light when the experiences of youth are typically the opposite, we use the terms “juvenile legal,” “criminal legal,” and “family regulation” in the refreshed strategic priorities set forth below.

A. Priorities for our Substantive Work

To address the deep harm and structural disparities of the juvenile legal, criminal legal, and family regulation 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 requires 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 will also continue to work for laws, policies, and practices affecting youth in these systems to be grounded in principles of adolescent development, human rights, racial justice, equity, and individual dignity, and to ensure that state systems are accountable to community members with the most at stake, system-involved youth their family members.

Our 2021-2024 plan set forth a distinct strategic priority to “imagine the future,” with a goal of envisioning a future without harmful juvenile legal and family regulation systems and considering our role in achieving this vision. In this refresh, we have incorporated the “imagine the future” work into our other substantive strategic priorities, recognizing that imagining the future is part and parcel of all our work. To further develop this work, we will deepen 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 move beyond systems of family regulation, policing, and incarceration. As we work to dismantle harmful systems, when alternatives are needed, we will focus on voluntary community-based support whenever possible and on the least restrictive system interventions available in each circumstance.

In light of the current political climate, we will also be flexible and strategic in response to unexpected threats to young people while still building on our expertise and working toward our longstanding vision for youth.



1. Strategic priority: Keep Youth Out of the Family Regulation and Juvenile and Criminal Legal Systems

We will challenge policing and surveillance of youth and families and the ongoing entanglement of youth within the family regulation and juvenile legal system. We will fight the criminalization of youth, in particular Black, Brown, and LGBTQ+ youth, and disparate referrals to the family regulation system.

We will advocate for community access to restorative approaches and other programs and resources that do not require system involvement.

We will advocate for procedural protections, such as the right to counsel, to minimize youth contact with police and the legal system.

2. Strategic Priority: Keep Youth Out of the Adult Criminal Legal System

We will engage in litigation and policy advocacy to ensure a meaningful right to parole for youth convicted in the adult system.

We will also challenge laws that permit the transfer of youth to the adult system, particularly the disproportionate impact of transfer laws on Black and Brown youth.

3. Strategic Priority: Keep Youth in their Homes and Communities

We will engage in policy advocacy to prevent placement for youth.

We will use conditions of confinement litigation to advocate for facility closure or for the release of young people from facilities and to confront the inequities in our juvenile and criminal legal systems and family regulation system.

We will challenge lengthy youth and adult sentences to move young people more quickly from incarceration back home.

4. Strategic Priority: Reduce Harm

We will engage in research, litigation, and policy advocacy to address a wide array of practices in the juvenile and criminal legal systems and family regulations systems that cause harm and exacerbate inequities: the imposition of fees, fines and other financial penalties; conditions of confinement for youth in placement; and extended surveillance of youth through retention and disclosure of juvenile and criminal records, sex offender registration and community notification requirements.



B. PRIORITIES FOR OUR INFRASTRUCTURE

We will engage in research, litigation, and policy advocacy to address a wide array of practices in the juvenile and criminal legal systems and family regulations systems that cause harm and exacerbate inequities: the imposition of fees, fines and other financial penalties; conditions of confinement for youth in placement; and extended surveillance of youth through retention and disclosure of juvenile and criminal records, sex offender registration and community notification requirements.

1. Strategic Priority: Ensure Needed Financial Resources in Alignment with our Mission, Vision, and Values, with Transparency and a Commitment to Equity

We will work closely with program and operations staff to develop a shared fiscal budget necessary for sustaining our work over the next two years and supplementing it for the future.

We will align our external outreach with the communications team to consistently include PR, media, and approved message-driven talking points within our fundraising strategies. We will steward, engage, and identify prospects driven by our vision of justice to secure and renew single and multi-year grants from regional and national foundations, and major family philanthropies.

We will maintain and grow individual contributions through yearly annual appeals, online marketing, funds, and special events.

We will use our 50th Anniversary Celebration as a key fundraising campaign opportunity through December 2025 to secure major, multi-year and recurring gifts to bring in enhanced resources to launch our work in upcoming years.

2. Strategic Priority: Engage in Strategic Communications to Promote Systems Change and Elevate the Organization's Work

We will work with project teams to develop and implement strategic communications plans for all ongoing advocacy work, including supporting our abolition and harm-reduction work.

We will continue to work toward our equity goals, including regularly reviewing our use of language to ensure our terms are respectful and culturally responsive and elevating diverse voices within our staff and the advocacy community, including providing needed media training.

We will assess our web presence and determine how best to use our website to meet the needs of attorneys, media, youth, community partners, and other stakeholders, engaging in targeted edits to the website as needed to meet these goals.

We will serve as a resource to strengthen the media ecosystem, including providing our expertise to journalists, producers, and others to support fair and fulsome representation of youth and to push back against harmful media narratives.





3. Strategic Priority: Strengthen Youth Leadership and Partnerships

We will incorporate youth expertise in our project teams and substantive work, through our youth advocacy fellowship program and by enhancing support and training from youth advocacy staff across the office.

We will identify opportunities for fellows, alumni, and youth to develop local and national expertise and presence.

We will clarify the structure and role of our youth advocacy program to ensure a sustainable and restorative model that builds youth skills and supports their well being, interpersonal growth, and professional development.

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

We will continue to use our policy and procedures for equitable hiring and retention, including engaging in conversations with a human resources consultant and the Union about any new provisions related to equity and inclusion and using the union contract development process as an opportunity to create additional transparent and equitable and inclusionary policies.

We will continue to work with a human resources consultant to ensure appropriate and equitable and inclusive treatment of all staff.

We will continue applying our internal tools for ensuring substantive work explicitly confronts racial disparities.

We will maintain a diverse Board 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

We will continue to identify and obtain the technology and put in place the infrastructure to ensure effective office operations, including an effective and efficient grant management system accessible to development and operations and other key staff.

We will also more effectively utilize the paralegal team in supporting policy and legal work.

We will work closely with the Board to further support our success in meeting the goals set forth in this strategic plan.



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