



NATIONAL JUVENILE DEFENDER CENTER



About us

The National Juvenile Defender Center was created to ensure excellence in juvenile defense and promote justice for all children. The juvenile defense bar is at the heart of ensuring that the indigent defense system established for children operates as fairly, accurately and humanely as possible.

Forty years ago, the United States Supreme Court issued its historic decision in *In re Gault*, establishing a constitutional right to counsel for children in delinquency proceedings. The need for competent counsel for every child accused of a crime has never been greater. While effective counsel has always been necessary to ensure fundamental fairness and just proceedings, to access appropriate and necessary services, and to ensure safe and humane conditions of confinement for those children who need to be incarcerated, the stakes have significantly increased. In the wake of a harsh wave of punitive legislation and massive juvenile code revision, children are now subject to increased sanctions, longer sentences, harsher conditions, zero tolerance mandates, erosion of confidentiality protections, placement on lifelong sex offender registries, decreased procedural protections related to transfer to adult court, and even life sentences without the possibility of parole. These laws have had a particularly negative impact on children of color, drawing large numbers of poor and minority children deeper into the justice system.

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IN THE JUSTICE SYSTEM
MUST HAVE READY AND
timely access
TO WELL-TRAINED
LEGAL COUNSEL.

NJDC provides support to public defenders, appointed counsel, law school clinical programs and non-profit law centers to ensure quality representation in urban, suburban, rural and tribal areas. NJDC operates a national network; maintains a premier website; manages scores of listservs; conducts assessments of access to and quality of counsel in states; orchestrates training and technical assistance; releases guidelines, training manuals and resources for juvenile defenders; and hosts our acclaimed Juvenile Defender Leadership Summit. NJDC provides consultation to hundreds of juvenile defenders on practice and policy issues across the nation. This wide range of integrated services helps us move toward ensuring excellence in juvenile defense and promoting justice for all children.

NJDC Mission and Vision Statement

To ensure excellence in juvenile defense and promote justice for all children.

We believe that:

- All children in the justice system must have ready and timely access to capable, well-resourced, well-trained legal counsel;
- All children are entitled to legal representation that is: individualized; developmentally and age appropriate; and free of racial, ethnic, gender, social, and economic bias;
- All children have strengths and the potential to become productive members of society and each has the right to constitutional and statutory protections;
- The juvenile defense bar must build its capacity, develop leadership and demonstrate a commitment to professionalism;
- The juvenile defense bar must promote accountability and bring about reform in the juvenile justice system;
- The juvenile defense bar's role in the justice system will be advanced through collaboration and partnership; and
- The juvenile defense system will be enhanced by greater community involvement.

The National Juvenile Defender Center works to create an environment in which:

- Children are treated with respect, dignity and fairness;
- Juvenile courts are knowledgeable, sensitive and responsive to the needs of children;
- Excellence is routine in juvenile defense;
- Juvenile defenders have the capacity to fully protect children's rights, including adequate resources and compensation, manageable caseloads, and sufficient access to investigation, expert and other ancillary and administrative support;
- Juvenile defenders have resources and pay parity with juvenile prosecutors; and
- The representation of children is specialized and adequate opportunities exist for juvenile defenders to fully exercise and enhance their legal, political, organizational, research and advocacy skills.

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