



As someone with lived experience, I am inspired by the Youth Law Center's advocacy efforts. As a lawyer, I believe deeply in the power of lawyering and advocacy to create conditions that prioritize families and opportunities for children and youth. The Youth Law Center's advocacy work to change systems through impact litigation, movement lawyering, policy reform,

collaboration, public education and training, and coalition building is unique. We integrate developmental research in practice and policy; use the law to define, protect, and affirm young people's rights; mobilize lawyers and other advocates; and, most importantly, listen to and elevate the voices of children, youth, and families.

The Youth Law Center is in its fifth decade of fighting for justice for systems-involved children and youth. We continue to evolve and expand based on the latest child and adolescent research, our expertise in systems change, the guidance of children and youth, and changes in conditions in our world. Our work is more important than ever, as communities and systems struggle with the ongoing impact of the pandemic, climate disasters, economic and labor changes, and a growing acknowledgment of how racial injustice impacts the most vulnerable children and families.

Together with our supporters, we take pride in celebrating the hard-earned victories that we have achieved. Our dedicated efforts have resulted in real and sustainable changes in the lives of children and youth. We have witnessed the implementation of pioneering policies and practices, significant investments in federal and state budgets, cultural transformations that prioritize children's developmental needs and relationships, and expanding opportunities for youth and families to lead change.

I am proud to chair the Youth Law Center's Board of Directors and to support the talented, dedicated, and determined Youth Law Center team who are committed to justice for our children and youth.

Joy Singleton, YLC Board Chair



Every day, I am moved by the compassion and generosity of the many people who care about the lives of children and youth in our nation's juvenile justice and foster care systems. Together, we are building the power of youth to drive change and using legal strategies to bring children and youth justice, emotional and physical safety, and access to the resources they need to thrive.

I know how important the Youth Law Center's advocacy is to these children because I was one of them. I remember the Youth Law Center lawyers who invested in my leadership and personal power, teaching me how to use the law as a tool long ago, when I was a teen just leaving foster care and incarceration.

As a youth advocate, I learned to translate my experiences of abuse and neglect in foster care and juvenile detention facilities into fighting for systems change. I never wanted another child to go through what I experienced. Through the Youth Law Center, I learned to be an effective legal advocate—and now, that's why I am so honored and humbled to serve as the Youth Law Center's Executive Director.

Each time I listen to children or youth who have been forgotten, neglected, criminalized, and dismissed, I'm reminded of how urgent it is for us to achieve effective change. It has been an amazing experience to invest in those closest to the problems and watch youth and families identify solutions, participate in policy reform, and lead change. With your moral and financial support over the past four decades, we have made significant progress towards a truly just society where every child can thrive.

Together we are ensuring that every child has the opportunity for a childhood filled with the love, stability, and positive experiences needed for them to become successful and happy adults.

In gratitude for your support and belief in our vision,

Jennifer Rodriguez, YLC Executive Director



Youth Law Center, a National
Legal Advocacy Organization

Our Mission

The Youth Law Center advocates to transform foster care and juvenile justice systems across the nation so every child and youth can thrive.

Our advocacy focuses on three goals for children and youth in foster care and juvenile justice:

1. End practices that harm children.
2. Ensure excellent parenting for every child, every day.
3. Guarantee that every child has the opportunity to thrive in adulthood.

Our Values

KNOWLEDGE of the law, research and the facts on the ground.

INTEGRITY to do what is best for our clients regardless of financial or social consequences to ourselves, and to be deserving of the trust of our supporters and clients.

COMMITMENT to pursue solutions urgently and relentlessly.

RESPECT for the individuality of children and families and their potential to thrive, and respect for the efforts of those who strive to serve them.

“The Youth Law Center is, in a word, effective. The team, led by Jennifer Rodriguez, is top-notch, bringing together legal expertise, lived experience, a commitment to being youth-centered, and the advocacy chops to effect systemic change.”

A recent example is the advocacy around out-of-state placements for foster youth. The Youth Law Center researched 16 facilities housing California kids and found abuse, neglect, appalling conditions, and rights violations. The Youth Law Center’s advocacy campaign resulted in the State of California halting admissions to those facilities and beginning the process to de-certify them in favor of family-based placements.

Systems-change work takes time but is deeply satisfying, and it’s why the Foundation continues to support the Youth Law Center.”

— Nancy Wiltsek, MNA, Executive Director,
van Löben Sels/RembeRock Foundation



Youth Law Center Founded in 1978

The Youth Law Center was formed by a handful of dedicated attorneys who believed that children's rights are important civil rights deserving of protection and expansion.

The Youth Law Center's initial advocacy focused on removing children from adult jails, addressing harmful conditions and destructive practices for incarcerated children, and ending the incarceration of children for status offenses. This focus drove our efforts to shut down youth prisons, end the practice of sentencing children as adults, close local juvenile detention facilities, and stop the use of incarceration as a "punishment" for children in foster care.

Over time, the Youth Law Center also began advocating to end similarly harmful conditions and destructive practices in foster care institutions and shelters and to end the use of these facilities as places where children spent their formative years. As we grew increasingly successful in ending harm to children and youth, we simultaneously worked with young people, families, and those closest to them to build child- and youth-focused systems that were informed by developmental science and that provided the opportunities young people needed to become healthy and happy adults. This work led to our most impactful systems-change effort yet: the Quality Parenting Initiative, a national movement to transform policy, practice, and culture to ensure that every child receives excellent parenting every day.



Our goals today are that:

- Children and youth receive appropriate education, health, and mental health services.
- Youth receive supports and services to make a healthy transition to adulthood.
- Systems function in a way that minimizes psychological harm to children and disruption of relationships and are grounded in child and youth development principles.
- Children in institutions are protected from abuse and neglect.
- Every child lives in a family and receives excellent parenting every day.

“Justice for children and youth is in the moment-to-moment unconditional love they receive. System transformation occurs when we prioritize the roots they need to grow and the wings they need to fly.” — Jennifer Rodriguez, Youth Law Center



Youth Law Center Strategies

Working for Children as if They Are Our Own

How the Youth Law Center Achieves Change:

Impact Litigation and Movement Lawyering

We use the courts and our legal tools to protect and expand the rights of children and youth and build young people's power to lead systems-change efforts.

QPI - Quality Parenting Initiative

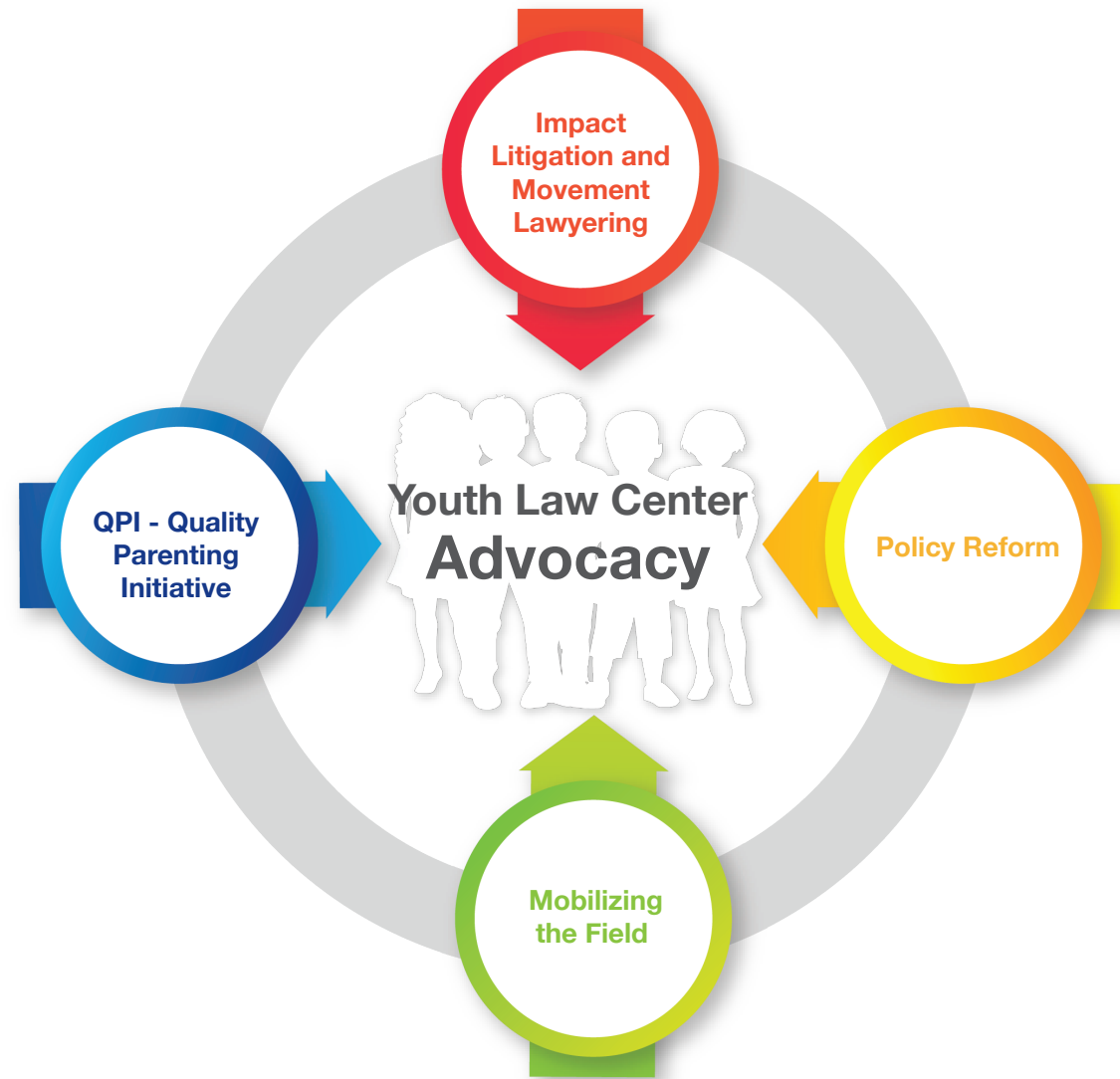
We lead QPI, a national movement working to ensure that all children and youth in foster care receive excellent parenting. QPI empowers youth, families, and community members to understand and access the law and to lead advocacy for change in child welfare policy, practice, and culture.

Policy Reform

We advance policy that will improve and enrich the lives of children, youth, and their families and advocate to eliminate harmful policies.

Mobilizing the Field

We lead coalitions and support stakeholders in promoting youth justice and wellbeing. Our advocacy resources, media campaigns, training, technical assistance, and thought leadership help civil legal aid lawyers, advocates, public defenders, policymakers, youth, families, community leaders, agencies, and philanthropy to drive effective systems change.





Highlights of the Youth Law Center's Recent Impacts

Youth Law Center Invests in the Leadership of 450+ Local QPI Champions to Lead National Foster Care Change

The Youth Law Center's Quality Parenting Initiative's newest strategy—QPI Champions—provides advocacy support designed to empower local community advocates to understand and access the law, lead systems change advocacy, and self-advocate to ensure that every child in foster care receives quality parenting as the primary intervention.

Over the last two years, QPI has invested in the leadership and advocacy capacity of over 450 local leaders, particularly directly-impacted youth and families, to champion changes in their own communities in California, Connecticut, Florida, Kansas, Louisiana, Minnesota, Nevada, New Mexico, and Pennsylvania. In addition to providing ongoing advocacy support for existing QPI Champions, and for the hundreds more in the pipeline, the Youth Law Center also offers opportunities to share best practices and learn alongside each other. We are building a movement that succeeds by investing in the power and capacity of numerous community-based leaders to effect policy change and lead other systemic fixes that ensure children's rights to grow up in a family and have a full childhood are enforced.

Youth Law Center's Partnership with Disability Rights Tennessee Helps Children Abused in the Juvenile Justice System

In 2022, the Youth Law Center formed a partnership with Disability Rights Tennessee (DRT) to launch an advocacy and media campaign addressing the abuse, neglect, and violence disproportionately inflicted on Black children in Tennessee's juvenile justice system. Our first report, *Designed to Fail: A Report on Wilder Youth Development Center*, exposed the rampant neglect and abuse of children occurring at Wilder Youth Development Center, garnering significant local and national media coverage. Our second report, *Families Not Facilities*, identified a series of recommendations and solutions for the broken system, which led to legislative hearings and proposed policies to dramatically reform the system.

The Youth Law Center's partnership and advocacy work with DRT continues with significant support from local community leaders, parents, youth, media, and select policymakers. Today, our advocacy in Tennessee also aims to prevent youth transfers to adult court and adult jail and to end the use of solitary confinement for youth. In light of recent events in Tennessee, the Youth Law Center's advocacy efforts face significant hurdles, but we have doubled down on the work to protect vulnerable children in Tennessee by demanding improved community supports in family settings.

“In QPI, everyone plays a role in shifting foster care culture from one that feels transactional to one that focuses on connection and caring. I see the difference- when we obtain input and feedback from the people we serve, services get better.”

— Carlos Perdomo. QPI Champion; Lead Foster Care Trainer & Licensing Specialist, Citrus Family Care Network, FL

Youth Law Center Wins New Resources to Provide College Access to California Students Impacted by the Juvenile Justice System

Since 2015, the Youth Law Center has led the charge to create new postsecondary educational opportunities for youth who have experienced the juvenile justice system. While a quality education is one of the most important strategies to ensure incarcerated youth are able to become healthy adults, current data suggests that fewer than 2% of youth exiting juvenile justice systems graduate from college. In California alone, approximately 30,000 young people are referred to probation departments annually—the vast majority of them Black, Latinx, and Indigenous.

In 2022, the Youth Law Center’s advocacy for juvenile justice system-impacted youth prompted policymakers to include a historic investment of \$15 million in ongoing funding in the California budget for community colleges to serve this community, funding model programs in 45 community colleges. As the first in the nation to make this degree of state-level investment, California is setting a national model for effective youth rehabilitation, reentry, and alternative community support. The Youth Law Center is now partnering with the California Community College Chancellor’s Office’s Rising Scholars Network to provide ongoing training and technical support to sustain these new and existing programs.



Youth Law Center Leads COVID-19 Relief for Youth and Families in California and Across the United States

When the COVID-19 pandemic struck in 2020, the Youth Law Center sprang into action to ensure that system-involved children and youth were not forgotten. The Youth Law Center created some of the first resources in the nation for youth advocates, disseminated model policy and practices, and pushed for crucial emergency policies and resources. We engaged experts to share guidance for agencies, courts, advocates, parents, and others on topics such as developmentally appropriate virtual visitation techniques, developing joint youth and family guidelines on technology use, how parents could support young people’s emotional needs during quarantines, and pandemic-related health and education considerations for children and youth in foster care. Over 10,000 individuals across the country received training and guidance from Youth Law Center staff and national experts.

Other examples of Youth Law Center’s advocacy to address the pandemic crisis include:

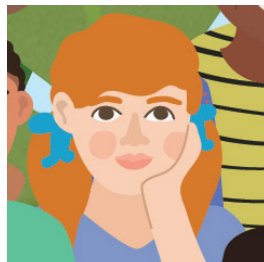
- Creating and leading a national coalition of advocacy organizations and youth, focused on developing a platform for critical pandemic-related supports for transition-aged youth.
- Co-leading advocacy with our partner organization California Youth Connection to ensure that California expedited the disbursement of \$41 million of federal money in direct cash assistance to youth in foster care, funds which have been a lifeline of support for those about to age out of foster care during a pandemic.
- Co-launching a report with the national “Check for Us” campaign to inform White House and Congressional strategy, based on direct feedback from 30 states.
- Successful advocacy to ensure that California youth were given the full benefit of laws and public benefits designed to prevent homelessness and provide housing.

Youth Law Center Builds Youth Power to Lead California Juvenile Justice Reform

In 2022, the Youth Law Center worked in partnership with youth and community allies to grow the power of the California youth decarceration movement. We aimed to develop community-based alternatives to incarceration, increase capacity and support for family-based models, and ensure that justice-impacted youth are able to remain with their families or return to their families as soon as possible. Together, we achieved some major steps forward: we helped grow the power of youth, local organizations, and communities to influence juvenile justice decision-making within individual counties, and we pushed back against investment in incarceration facilities, calling instead for investment in community-based alternatives.

Youth Law Center and pro bono partner Baker McKenzie filed litigation in both Fresno and Sacramento counties on behalf of community partners and secured settlement agreements to protect and strengthen the rights of youth and families to participate in juvenile justice policymaking by enforcing California's open meeting laws. In 2023, the Youth Law Center also filed statewide litigation to seek an order from the court requiring that a new probation entity comply with California's public transparency laws to allow youth and community participation.

This is a crucial moment for community engagement in local juvenile justice policy decision-making. Earlier Youth Law Center advocacy pushed California to close its state youth prisons, which resulted in juvenile justice jurisdiction moving to individual counties. The aim was for a new public health approach that promotes positive youth development and reduces reliance on confinement. This state-to-county realignment process will succeed only if community members, particularly justice-impacted youth and families, have a meaningful seat at the planning table.



Youth Law Center Ends California's Use of Dangerous Out-of-State Foster Care Facilities

In 2021, the Youth Law Center launched an advocacy campaign that stemmed from a terrible tragedy. In a Michigan facility for youth, a 16-year-old child was killed by staff for the crime of throwing a sandwich; investigations soon uncovered widespread abuse, neglect, and disregard for children's wellbeing at the troubled institution.

In response, the Youth Law Center demanded that California fulfill its obligations of oversight and enforcement to protect California youth placed in this and other dangerous out-of-state facilities, which failed to comply with state standards, and to ensure instead that children receive appropriate care in family settings in their home communities. The Youth Law Center utilized legal, legislative, and media advocacy to secure laws that prohibit child welfare and probation departments from sending children to out-of-state residential facilities, bringing hundreds of young people home to California and resulting in the closure of unsafe facilities across the country.

The Youth Law Center's victory on this issue comes almost 30 years after we began advocacy in response to a San Francisco boy being declared brain-dead after a violent restraint by staff in a Nevada institution. The Youth Law Center will continue our advocacy to ensure that all children and youth receive the supports necessary to grow up safely in families in their communities.



Advocating for...

Youth and Children's Rights to a Childhood

Every child deserves family, community, a childhood, and the supports they need to grow up healthy and happy. The Youth Law Center advocates to improve the conditions, care, and treatment of children for whom the foster care and juvenile justice systems are responsible by using the law to protect childhood and enforce young people's rights.

Ending the Incarceration and Criminalization of Children

For decades, the Youth Law Center has led efforts to limit youth incarceration through policy reform, litigation, community mobilization, and public education. Funneling vulnerable children into the juvenile justice system causes trauma, disrupts learning, impedes healthy development, and heightens the risk of poor long-term educational, employment, and health outcomes. The Youth Law Center's advocacy has focused on reforms to ensure children are not criminalized for being and acting like adolescents and that directly-impacted youth can lead system change.

Families, Not Facilities

The Youth Law Center has successfully advanced federal, state, and local reforms across the country to limit the use of institutional placements and ensure that children have access to community-based behavioral health and other services, allowing them to live in their families and local communities free of the negative impacts of institutional care on their healthy development. This advocacy has created protections for special populations like babies and toddlers, established limitations on inappropriate congregate care, and created new supports and resources in the community.



Safe, Humane Living Conditions

The Youth Law Center's advocacy has stopped illegal and inhumane practices in juvenile detention and foster care facilities, including physical, sexual, and emotional abuse; use of solitary confinement; dangerous use of physical and chemical restraints; and routine body searches. It has also forced facilities to address their failure to provide basic entitlements such as contact with family and friends; medical and mental health care; and education, especially for those with disabilities and special needs.



Advocating for...

Excellent Parenting for Children and Youth



In 2008, the Youth Law Center launched the Quality Parenting Initiative (QPI) in Florida, as a pilot advocacy project committed to ensuring that all children in care have excellent parenting and lasting relationships so they can thrive and grow.

Today, QPI leads and provides advocacy support to a national movement that includes 80 sites and 10 states comprising children and youth, birth and foster families, foster care agency leadership and staff, judges, legal professionals, policymakers, adolescent development experts, and other community stakeholders all committed to ensuring every child in foster care receives the best possible care and support.

QPI is an advocacy strategy, method, and approach to transforming a foster care system so that it can support family care. It is built on the understanding that consistent, excellent parenting and meaningful relationships are the most basic needs and key rights of children and youth in foster care. Systems must ensure that every policy and practice enhances rather than undermines their ability to meet these needs.



“Youth Law Center’s advocacy to prioritize relationships and parenting for children holds great promise for American child welfare policy and practice. Without question, it is the most exciting innovation in child welfare that I have witnessed in my career.”

— Charles H. Zeanah, Jr., MD

Mary Peters Sellars-Polchow Chair of Psychiatry; Vice Chair, Child and Adolescent Psychiatry; Tulane University Professor of Psychiatry and Pediatrics; Executive Director, Infant Institute

80
SITES IN
10
STATES

100,000
CHILDREN
IMPACTED EVERY DAY

7,000+ QPI TRAINING PARTICIPANTS
SINCE START OF COVID-19 PANDEMIC

450+
QPI CHAMPIONS
TRAINED

POLICY
IMPACT
IN 50 STATES

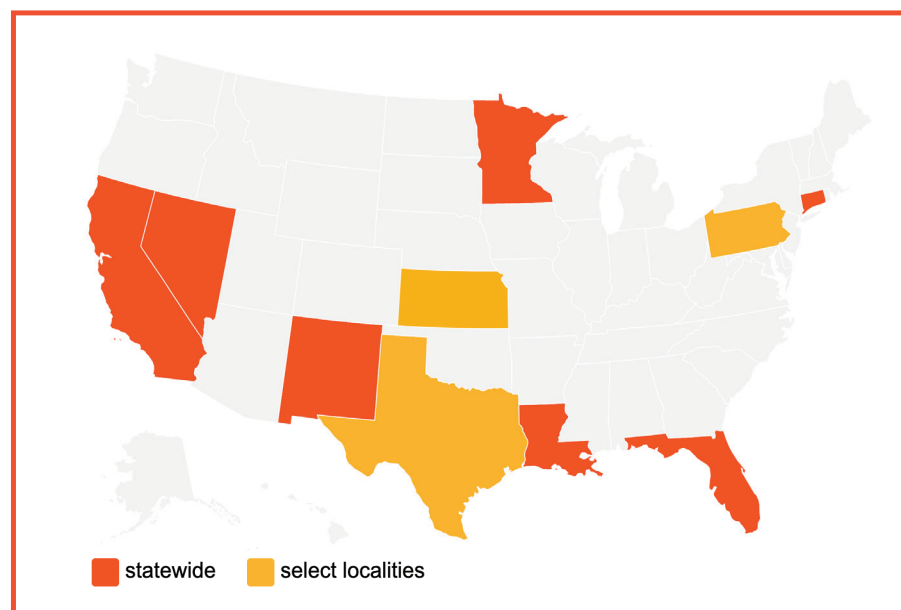
QPI sites rely on two principles for reviewing policies and practices and identifying necessary changes:

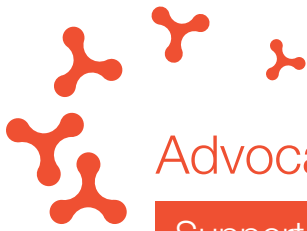
- Research on child and adolescent development provides clear guidance on the key elements of excellent parenting and how best to support them; agency policy and practice must be informed by this research.
- The individuals most affected by policies and practices are in the best position to design and implement change so that systems ensure excellent parenting and meaningful relationships for children who enter their care; those most affected should take the lead in identifying necessary changes.

Recent QPI innovative advocacy strategies include:

- Establishing the Champions model and training over 450 local community members as advocates and leaders of change.
- Launching Quality Parenting Outreach (QPO), a text-based data collection system used by QPI sites to directly engage all foster parents and kin in agency decision-making.

QPI has brought about important changes in policies and practices at the federal, state, and local levels designed to safeguard children's relationships, their ability to live with families, and their participation in typical childhood experiences. Examples of QPI policy impact include new policies and practices that require improvements such as youth and family involvement in decision-making processes, ensuring vital information is shared with foster parents and kin, supporting positive relationships between biological, foster, and extended kinship families, implementing age-appropriate visitation and smooth transitions for children, and prioritizing child-centered placement practices.





Advocating for...

Supports that Help Youth Succeed in Adulthood

The Youth Law Center advocates for youth leaving the foster care and juvenile justice systems to have the supports needed to thrive, including relationships, access to education, housing, food, economic supports, parenting support, and mental and physical health care.

Ensuring Housing and Needed Supports

The Youth Law Center's advocacy has increased young people's access to safe and stable housing, economic benefits, and behavioral health supports necessary to prevent homelessness. Youth Law Center is leading efforts to work with youth, thought leaders, policymakers, advocates, and others to reimagine how we support youth exiting systems in light of future changes such as climate disasters, technological dependence, and increasing social and economic volatility.

Building Pathways to Postsecondary Education

Youth Law Center's advocacy has expanded access to postsecondary education opportunities for youth impacted by the juvenile justice and foster care systems through advancing policy, supporting expansion of model college programs, undertaking administrative advocacy, securing new resources, and elevating youth voices.

Strengthening Legal Aid for Transition-Aged Youth

As a California State Bar Support Center for legal aid programs, the Youth Law Center provides advocacy support, training, resources, and education to civil legal aid programs to ensure systems-involved youth have access to justice and receive maximum legal protections and public benefits.



The Youth Law Center leads a coalition of California civil legal aid programs dedicated to improved advocacy for systems-impacted youth and their families and supports legal aid programs in ensuring young people's legal rights to housing, behavioral health care, economic benefits, and other resources are enforced.

Mobilizing for National Change

The Youth Law Center leads a nationwide coalition working to build power for improving federal policies for transition-aged youth. Culminating in the passage of the Supporting Foster Youth and Families Through the Pandemic Act, the coalition's work ensured that system-involved youth were included as recipients of critical financial and other support in the federal response to the COVID-19 pandemic.



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“As an original founder more than 40 years ago and now a board member, I am so proud of the Youth Law Center. I began my career as a child advocate and watched the Youth Law Center grow and develop firsthand. The Youth Law Center has achieved phenomenal successes, especially in its pioneering efforts to improve the lives of thousands, more likely millions, of children and parents in foster care and juvenile justice systems all over the country.”

— Mark Soler



Foundation Partners 2020—Present

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“The Youth Law Center is truly a cornerstone organization, successfully building a network of nonprofit and public sector advocates committed to promoting pathways to and through postsecondary education for youth connected to the juvenile justice system.

By fostering links between the probation system and California’s higher education institutions, the Youth Law Center and its policy advocacy strategies have advanced the notion that justice reform must meaningfully include youth.

The team at the Youth Law Center is a valuable thought partner to Cal Wellness as we consider our investments to help improve the wellbeing of youth who are too often ignored.”

— Jeffrey S. Kim, Program Officer, The California Wellness Foundation

Youth Law Center is a 501(c)3 tax exempt organization. We invite you to review the tax documents filed on behalf of the Youth Law Center.

For additional information, email info@YLC.org.

Youth Law Center
 832 Folsom Street, Suite 700
 San Francisco, CA 94107
 (415) 543-3379

www.ylc.org and www.qpi4kids.org

[YLC 2021 990 Report](#)

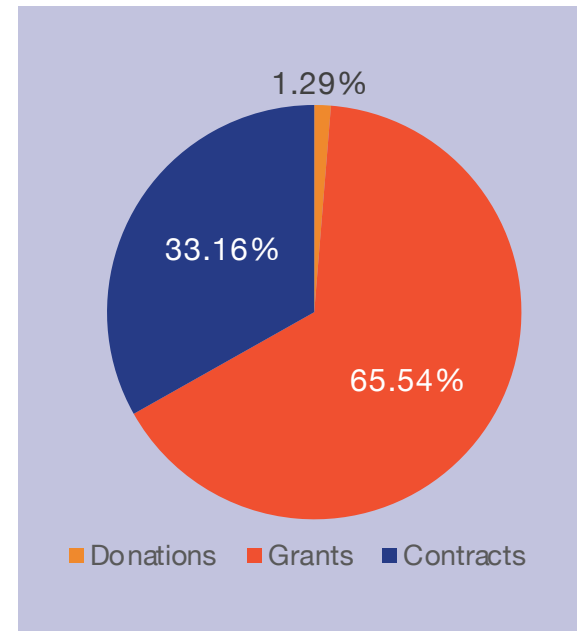
[YLC 2020 990 Report](#)

[YLC 2019 990 Report](#)

[YLC 2018 990 Report](#)

[YLC 2017 990 Report](#)

2022 Funding Sources





Special Thanks

Thank you, our partners and donors, for being part of our movement to ensure that every child has a happy, healthy childhood and grows up in a loving family.

Together, we will continue to work to end the criminalization, institutionalization, and dehumanization of children. More importantly, we will work to advance advocacy that ensures that the young people and families most affected have the power, opportunities, and resources to create a different future where children are safe, loved, and free to dream and exist.

And thanks to Queenbe Monyei for her wonderful illustrations. Queenbe is an illustrator and author whose use of bold colors and patterns can be seen throughout her work with clients including Anthropologie, Facebook, HarperCollins, American Greetings, The Boston Globe, Hallmark, Hotwire, LA Times, Warby Parker, and the Washington Post among others. Her book ABC Black History and Me is available now on Amazon.

Graphic design by JulieCo LLC.

