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NJDC, NCJFCJ and Fair and Just Prosecution Release Joint Statement on the Importance of Specialization of Judges, Prosecutors and Defenders in Juvenile Delinquency Proceedings and Resource for Best Practices and Language in Juvenile Court

Today, the [National Juvenile Defender Center](#) (NJDC), the [National Council of Juvenile and Family Court Judges](#) (NCJFCJ) and [Fair and Just Prosecution](#) (FJP) released a joint statement underscoring the importance of specialization, training and experience for judges, prosecutors and defenders assigned to all-important juvenile delinquency practice. In collaboration with the [Georgetown Law Juvenile Justice Initiative](#), these groups have also published a resource guide delineating best practices for understanding behavior and using appropriate language in juvenile court.

“We all want young people to thrive,” said **Mary Ann Scali, executive director of NJDC**. “To provide young people involved in the juvenile court system their best opportunities for success, we must surround them with legal professionals who have dedicated their careers to this work and whose interactions and language honor each child’s potential.”

The [joint statement](#) focuses on the vital importance of appropriately addressing the needs, and ensuring the success, of young people who come into contact with the juvenile delinquency system. It underscores the importance of judges, prosecutors and defenders:

- Specializing in juvenile court practice within their jurisdiction and offices;
- Limiting young people’s involvement in the juvenile court system and expanding young people’s opportunities for success;
- Acquiring relevant legal experience prior to being assigned to juvenile court and/or a demonstrated commitment to working with young people;
- Receiving baseline training prior to juvenile court assignment in key topics including the impact of trauma, adolescent development, communicating with young people, juvenile laws and procedures, the operation of other systems that have substantial overlap with the juvenile court system and issues of race and culture;
- Participating in ongoing training regarding advancements in social and scientific research relevant to young people and in juvenile and criminal laws;

- Promoting leadership that values and respects the judges, attorneys and staff assigned to the juvenile division; and
- Accessing leadership and managerial opportunities, promotions, raises and other professional advancement and support equivalent to colleagues who practice in adult criminal court.

“It is imperative that judges, prosecutors, defenders and other court professionals be properly trained to respond and serve children and families in the juvenile justice system,” said **Joey Orduña Hastings, chief executive officer of the NCJFCJ**. “Juvenile court proceedings have life-long effects so the knowledge and training necessary to understand adolescent brain development and be informed of trauma-informed practices while recognizing the disproportionate impacts of race are crucial in determining the right outcomes for young people in the system.”

Another important collaborative project by these groups – [*Seeing What’s Underneath: A Resource for Understanding Behavior & Using Language in Juvenile Court*](#) – provides a two-part guide for juvenile court professionals. Part I of the guide is focused on breaking down some of the barriers between young people who experience juvenile court and those who work in it. The guide can help system decision-makers understand and respond to normal adolescent behaviors with compassion and empathy and develop strategies to validate a young person’s anxiety and trauma.

Part II offers guidance on the language used in juvenile court and encourages system decision-makers to adopt communication that affirms the dignity and value of all youth. Alternative language and terms are suggested to support positive identity development and to promote fairness, equity and justice for all young people.

"Our criminal legal system should treat kids like kids, which requires professionals who are properly trained and prepared to work with children," said **Miriam Krinsky, Executive Director of Fair and Just Prosecution** and the former head of a legal services organization that represented over 20,000 children in the child welfare system. “The way we treat young people in juvenile court can have lasting impact on their futures. We owe it to them to treat them with dignity, provide them with support that can put them on a positive future trajectory and demonstrate in our language as well as our actions our sincere belief that they have the capacity for change."

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About the [*National Juvenile Defender Center*](#) (NJDC):

The National Juvenile Defender Center is dedicated to promoting justice for all children by ensuring excellence in juvenile defense. Through community building, training, and policy reform, NJDC provides national leadership on juvenile defense issues, with a focus on curbing the deprivation of young people’s rights in the court system. NJDC works to ensure that the reform of juvenile courts includes the protection of children’s rights, particularly the right to counsel.

About the [National Council of Juvenile and Family Court Judges](#) (NCJFCJ):

Founded in 1937, the Reno, Nev.-based National Council of Juvenile and Family Court Judges, is the nation's oldest judicial membership organization and focused on improving the effectiveness of our nation's juvenile and family courts. A leader in continuing education opportunities, research, and policy development in the field of juvenile and family justice, the NCJFCJ serves an estimated 30,000 juvenile and family court professionals and is unique in providing practice-based resources to jurisdictions and communities nationwide.

About [Fair and Just Prosecution](#) (FJP):

Fair and Just Prosecution brings together newly elected local prosecutors as part of a network of leaders committed to promoting a justice system grounded in fairness, equity, compassion, and fiscal responsibility. These recently elected leaders – and the vision they share for safer and healthier communities – are supported by FJP's network through ongoing information sharing, research and resource materials, opportunities for on the ground learning, in-person convenings, technical assistance, and access to national experts.