Improving Juvenile Indigent Defense

In May 1967, the U.S. Supreme Court issued a landmark ruling in In re Gault that established the right to counsel for youth in delinquency cases. Despite progress made in the five decades since that decision, the promise of In re Gault has yet to become a reality for many of America’s youth. Research shows that barriers to juveniles’ receipt of proper counsel may include juvenile defenders’ excessive caseloads, inadequate compensation for public defenders, and a lack of juvenile-specific training for lawyers.

Juvenile defenders play a critical role in ensuring fairness and equity for youth and families, and in preserving public confidence in the juvenile justice system. By funding efforts that will help to improve outcomes for indigent juvenile offenders, OJJDP is helping to reduce the risk of reoffending, enhance public safety, and increase the likelihood that these youth will become productive, law-abiding members of society.

Program

Enhancements for Juvenile Indigent Defense

Through this program, OJJDP is working to ensure that all youth involved with the juvenile justice system have equal access to specialized, well-resourced, juvenile defense counsel. Grantees use program funds to improve the quality and availability of legal services, to respond to gaps in practice, and to ensure that juveniles have access to resources that address the collateral consequences of justice system involvement. Grantees may also use funds to train court personnel, improve juvenile courts’ data collection efforts, analyze a jurisdiction’s juvenile defense delivery system, and identify and implement successful strategies that may be replicable across jurisdictions.

Training and Technical Assistance

National Juvenile Defender Center

The National Juvenile Defender Center provides technical assistance to juvenile defenders and juvenile defense agencies across the country; conducts juvenile-specific trainings for public defenders and court-appointed counsel; supports the creation of specialized juvenile defender units; and develops tools, training, and resources specific to identified regional, state, and local needs. The center also maintains a clearinghouse of information on juvenile defense and children’s constitutional rights.

For More Information

Access more information about how OJJDP helps to ensure that all justice-involved youth receive the guarantees of due process and equal protection at https://ojjdp.ojp.gov/programs/indigent-defense.