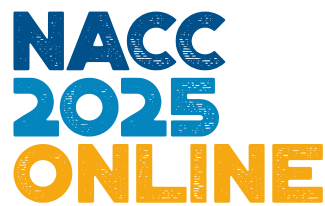




# NACC

National Association  
of Counsel for Children



## NACC 2025 ONLINE



NOVEMBER  
12-14, 2025

**ALL SESSION  
TIMES ARE  
EASTERN  
STANDARD**

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# 48TH NATIONAL CHILD WELFARE LAW CONFERENCE

## Catalysts for Change: Innovating Advocacy through Power Sharing and Transformational Leadership

### THE CONFERENCE [↗](#)

The annual conferences bring together professionals from child welfare law and intersecting fields and further NACC's mission by exchanging ideas, information, and collective efforts.

The theme of this year's conference is *Catalysts for Change: Innovating Advocacy through Power Sharing and Transformational Leadership*. This theme underscores the need to rethink traditional advocacy models, actively share power, and harness the creativity and resourcefulness of all involved in child welfare systems to drive lasting, meaningful practice and policy reform.

Conference sessions are designed for a national audience, including attorneys who represent children, parents, agencies, and kinship caregivers, as well as judges and multidisciplinary professionals working in child welfare. Sessions will expand attendees' understanding of the law, provide practical tools, and lend information and strategies for systems improvement.



## ABOUT NACC [↗](#)

Founded in 1977, the National Association of Counsel for Children (NACC) is a nonprofit professional membership and advocacy organization dedicated to advancing justice for children, youth, and families. NACC has led the evolution of child welfare law from a cause to a profession by establishing child welfare as a specialty field requiring distinctive training, skills, and support. NACC trains and certifies attorneys who represent children, families, and agencies; supports a diverse community of professionals; and advocates for policy reform alongside young people and families. NACC helps lawyers provide quality legal representation to children, parents, and agencies, and advances policies that protect the rights of children, youth, and parents impacted by the child welfare system. Accredited by the American Bar Association to certify attorneys as Child Welfare Law Specialists (CWLS), NACC is nationally renowned in the legal community and the child welfare sector.

**Our Mission:** NACC advances children’s and parents’ rights by supporting a diverse, inclusive community of child welfare lawyers to provide zealous legal representation and by advocating for equitable, anti-racist solutions co-designed by people with lived experience.

**Our Vision:** Every child, parent, and family is well-supported in their community and has equitable access to justice through culturally responsive, client-centered legal representation.

## THANK YOU TO OUR CONFERENCE ABSTRACT WORKGROUP!



Shannon Felder  
Josephine Vanderhorst  
Kathryn Banks  
Gina Cabiddu

Currey Cook  
Chelsay Finney  
Kimberly Jordan  
alistair goodson smith

Kyana Pierson  
Tequilla Washington



## SPONSOR, EXHIBIT, ADVERTISE [↗](#)

Sponsorship, exhibiting, and advertising are excellent ways to promote your organization, products, and services to a wide range of multidisciplinary legal professionals serving children and families.

We offer the option to designate all or a portion of your sponsorship to scholarships for attendees with financial need, who are students, and/or who advance diversity in the child welfare legal profession.

## CONTINUING LEGAL EDUCATION CREDITS

NACC has applied for CLE accreditation in 7 states (CA, CO, LA, MS, OH, PA, and TX) for live online participation. Details about accreditation and sessions with special credits can be found on page 16 [↗](#). Email [CLE@NACCchildlaw.org](mailto:CLE@NACCchildlaw.org) with questions.



THE ANNIE E. CASEY FOUNDATION

The Annie E. Casey Foundation is a private philanthropy that creates **a brighter future for the nation’s children and youth** by developing solutions to strengthen families, build paths to economic opportunity and transform struggling communities into safer and healthier places to live, work, and grow.

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A Division of  
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ATTORNEYS AT LAW

## Who We Are? *We fight for children*

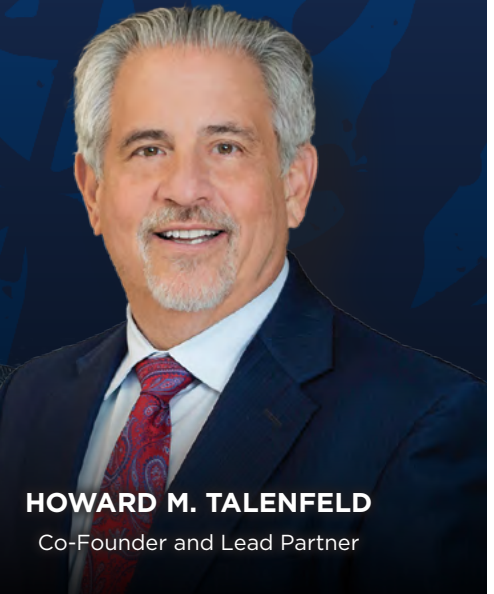
Justice for Kids®, a division of Kelley Kronenberg, is the premier law practice dedicated to protecting abused, disabled, and injured children who are harmed in child welfare and disability systems. Our mission is to be fierce advocates for children's rights and to drive systemic change in child welfare throughout the United States using innovative legal strategies. Unlike most personal injury law firms, JFK specializes in representing children who've been injured by the very child protection and disability systems meant to protect them. We bring personal injury and civil rights claims on behalf of children, through their guardians and next friends, including attorneys ad litem, guardians ad litem, biological parents, adoptive parents and others, against the child welfare agencies who were responsible to protect them but failed through their negligent or intentional conduct. Our mission is to give these children a voice and a chance at the future they deserve.



**JUSTIN D. GROSZ**  
Co-Founder and Lead Partner



**STACIE SCHMERLING**  
Co-Founder and Lead Partner



**HOWARD M. TALENFELD**  
Co-Founder and Lead Partner

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**ONLINE Conference Day 1: Wednesday, Nov 12, 2025**

**ALL SESSION TIMES ARE EASTERN STANDARD**

**11:00am - 11:15am EST Welcome**  
*PRESENTERS* **KIM DVORCHAK, JD** – NACC Chief Executive Officer  
**DAWNE MITCHELL, JD** – NACC Board President

**11:15am - 12:45pm EST ONLINE PLENARY 1**  
**OP1 Engaging Families, Humanizing Justice: A Path to Better Outcomes**  
*PRESENTERS* **VALERIE FROST, M.ED** – Consultant  
**NATHAN GOINS, JD** – Kentucky Administrative Office of the Courts

Attorneys and judges play a key role in engaging parents and youth during one of the most uncertain times in their lives. By balancing legal expertise with empathy, court professionals can help families navigate the process with greater clarity. In this session, we will explore practical strategies for meaningful engagement, both in and outside the courtroom, that foster collaboration, improve communication, and lead to better outcomes. We will decode “engagement-ese” at both the direct service and broader advocacy levels, sharing real-world examples in action.

**1:15pm - 2:45pm EST ONLINE BREAKOUT A**

**OA1 Moving from Family Policing to Child and Family Well-Being: Listening to Lived Expertise through the Family Justice Initiative**  
*PRESENTERS* **PRUDENCE BEIDLER CARR, JD** – ABA Center on Children and the Law  
**ALEXANDRIA CINNEY, JD** – ABA Center on Children and the Law  
**LOUIE GASPER** – ABA Center on Children and the Law  
**JOYCE “JMAC” MCMILLAN** – JMACforFamilies

This session will intertwine promoting best practice for high-quality legal representation and introducing transformative ideas from lived experience experts with the ABA’s Family Justice Initiative (FJI). First highlighting FJI’s resources and strategies, the session will evolve into a roleplay with Joyce McMillan assuming the role as commissioner of a state system. Joyce will provide insights to attorneys/systems around complex issues such as challenging TPR, mandated supporting, establishing parent rights, proactive motion-filing, culturally and racially responsive service array, and other issues. Moderated by Louie Gasper (NACCLR alum) with direct insights on practical implementation from Prudence Beidler Carr (ABA director), this session will promote existing and emerging strategies for change.

**OA2 Representing Trafficked Youth**  
*PRESENTERS* **AMANDA BEYAH, AA, LIVED EXPERIENCE EXPERT** – Defender Association of Philadelphia - Child Advocacy Unit  
**THEO CICCARELLI CORNETTA, JD** – Defender Association of Philadelphia - Child Advocacy Unit  
**KEIRA LEVENTHAL, JD** – Defender Association of Philadelphia - Child Advocacy Unit  
**MEGAN SOMSANITH, LMSW, MLSP** – Defender Association of Philadelphia - Child Advocacy Unit

This session will focus on how to represent youth who have been or are at risk of being trafficked. The discussion will be framed from a dependency perspective but will be widely applicable to trafficking courtrooms and interacting

with youth who have experienced trafficking. We will cover the federal statute and legal definitions of trafficking as well as a breakdown of what trafficking can look like and how we as advocates can support youth. Following the legal overview, we will provide examples of trafficking indicators and language used within the trafficking world as well as concrete case examples showing how these indicators present in real world scenarios. We will close out the session with an in-depth exploration of how to connect with and interact with youth victims and survivors.

3:15pm – 4:45pm EST **ONLINE BREAKOUT B**

**OB1 Youth’s Constitutional Rights to Family Integrity and Association as a Tool for Family Unity**

**PRESENTERS** JEAN STROUT, JD – National Center for Youth Law  
SHANTA TRIVEDI, JD – University of Baltimore School of Law

In addition to the constitutional right of parents to the care, custody, and control of their children, federal courts have also recognized the child’s constitutional rights to “family integrity” and “family association”: to be in the care and custody of their parents, and to maintain relationships with their parents when separated – but these rights continue to be underrecognized and underutilized. This session will cover the source of these rights, their scope, and how children’s lawyers can utilize these rights in their advocacy. Finally, presenters will discuss strategies for using the family integrity and association rights to achieve broader change, such as establishing a youth’s right to client-directed counsel or to petition for post-TPR contact.

**OB2 New York Mandated Reporting Working Group: A Collaborative Developing Policy Solutions to End the Harm of Reporting Practices**

**PRESENTERS** SHALONDA CURTIS-HACKETT, LIVED EXPERIENCE EXPERT – Neighborhood Defender Service of Harlem  
RACHEL GHOSH, PHD – Children’s Rights  
HANNAH MERCURIS, JD – Center for Family Representation

In this session, we will discuss the harms of mandated reporting (MR) laws, through the lens of an impacted parent advocate and a policy researcher, and we will explore how the New York Mandated Reporting Working Group (NY MRWG) is working to transform MR laws. We will discuss the historical context of MR, variation in state policies, and research on the (in)effectiveness of MR. Finally, we will discuss the NY MRWG, including its engagement with lived experience experts and mandated reporters, its policy solutions, and its work with NY Assemblyman Andrew Hevesi on a bill to eliminate the penalties associated with not reporting. We aim to engage advocates from across the country in a discussion about the practice of reporting, its impact on families and professionals, and policy solutions to better achieve safety for children.

5:15pm – 6:45pm EST **ONLINE PLENARY 2**

**OP2 “Failure to Provide...”: How the CWARE Collaborative Co-Created a Know Your Rights Toolkit to Help Communities End Poverty-Based Family Separations**

**PRESENTERS** SHEMIA DILLARD, LIVED EXPERIENCE CONSULTANT – Sayra and Neil Meyerhoff Center for Families, Children and the Courts  
AUBREY EDWARDS-LUCE, MSW, JD – Sayra and Neil Meyerhoff Center for Families, Children and the Courts  
ALIYAH ZEIEN, MSW, CSW, LIVED EXPERIENCE EXPERT – CWARE; unbound now

In February 2025, the Child Welfare and Race Equity (CWARE) Collaborative released its *Know Your Rights* Toolkit, a legal-knowledge resource that was co-authored by individuals with lived experience with foster care as children, youth, parents and caregivers. Housed in the University of Baltimore School of Law’s Sayra & Neil Meyerhoff Center for Families, Children and the Courts, CWARE is a group of child welfare advocates working together to promote a radical anti-racist transformation of the child welfare system so that children, parents, and families are free to thrive in their homes and communities. In this session, three of the Toolkit’s authors will describe lessons learned from the production process and explain the multiple ways it can be utilized.



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- 3 TRAFFICKING IN-PERSONS**  
Human trafficking identification, intervention, and survivor-centered responses
- 4 SOCIO-ECOLOGICAL COORELATES OF ABUSE**  
Understanding environmental and systemic factors that contribute to child maltreatment
- 5 SURVIVOR IMPACT AND UNDERSTANDING OF ABUSE**  
Trauma-informed approaches and survivor-centered practice methods



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CREATE TRAINING**

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Department of Justice



**SCAN TO  
CONTACT US**

 [zeroabuseproject.org/cast](https://zeroabuseproject.org/cast)

**ONLINE Conference Day 2: Thursday, Nov 13, 2025**

**ALL SESSION TIMES ARE EASTERN STANDARD**

10:00am - 11:30am EST **ONLINE BREAKOUT C**

**OC1 Addressing Disparities and Disproportionality in Child Welfare: Improving Placement Stability for Young Children**

*PRESENTERS* **SEBASTIAN DEL CORRAL WINDER, PSYD** – LSUHSC – School of Medicine New Orleans  
**THAILUND PORTER-GREEN, JD** – Mental Health Advocacy Service/Child Advocacy Program

Children in foster care, particularly young children, face significant challenges in achieving placement stability, often due to systemic disparities and disproportionality. This session will explore key factors contributing to out-of-home placement instability, including racial and socioeconomic disparities, trauma exposure, and service accessibility. Presenters will provide research-based insights and practical recommendations to improve placement stability and long-term outcomes for young children in foster care. Attendees will leave with actionable strategies to create more equitable and supportive child welfare systems.

**OC2 Special Immigrant Juvenile Status: Guidance for Non-Immigration Lawyers**

*PRESENTERS* **ADAM BENNETT, JD** – Attorney at Law  
**ANDREA GRANDE, JD** – Attorney at Law

The session will discuss legal relief available through Special Immigrant Juvenile Status (SIJS), which provides a pathway to permanent legal residence for unaccompanied minors. SIJS is a protection for youth who have suffered abuse, abandonment, or neglect. Unlike most types of immigration relief, obtaining SIJS requires findings in state court as well as the federal immigration system. We will highlight the impact of SIJS for child advocates with minimal experience working in immigration, and will clarify procedural requirements to explain how advocates can pursue SIJS. We will briefly review the history of SIJS as well as provide current updates under the new administration, as well as important differences in state laws that make SIJS findings easier or more difficult to obtain.

12:00pm - 1:30pm EST **ONLINE BREAKOUT D**

**OD1 From Accomplice to Ally: Transforming Your Practice with Abolitionist Strategies**

*PRESENTERS* **L GAGNE** – Acacia Center for Justice  
**JONAKI SANYAL, LCSW-C, CGP** – Acacia Center for Justice

This presentation will utilize a community-oriented approach to examine how providers (including legal advocates) operating within inherently violent systems can reduce the harm inflicted on their clients by reimagining what constitute trauma-informed, healing-centered practices. Building on tenets of abolitionist praxis, this presentation will offer providers tools for restoring power and agency to children through safe, stable, nurturing relationships (SSNRs) and connection with their communities. Rather than experiencing their role as facilitators of immutable processes, abolitionist strategies for healing-centered services encourage providers to disrupt harmful systems in favor of liberatory harm reduction and transformative justice.

**OD2 Reimagining Attachment in Dependency Cases: Fostering Fairness and Equity**

*PRESENTERS* **NATE BUSTAMANTE, LIVED EXPERIENCE EXPERT** – Colorado Office of Respondent Parents' Counsel  
**JESSICA HANDELMAN, LCSW-BCD** – Colorado Forensic Family Advocacy, LLC  
**DANNY JACKSON, JD** – Law Office of Daniel M. Jackson, LLC

This session will inspire compelling conversations to uncover the impact of relying solely on attachment theory in dependency cases to guide permanency outcomes. We will discuss its optimal use at case onset for interventions and treatment recommendations, as well as its potential misuse in determining a child's permanency and best interest. Facilitated by experts – a juvenile law attorney, an LCSW specializing in dependency cases, and a parent with lived experience in the system – the session will delve into a point/counterpoint discussion supported by relevant and recent social science literature and evolving legislation.

**1:45pm – 2:15pm EST Conversation with Justice for Kids®**

*PRESENTERS* **JUSTIN GROSZ, JD** – Justice for Kids®, a Division of Kelley Kronenberg  
**JOHN WALSH, JD** – Legal Aid Society of Palm Beach County, Inc.

Justice for Kids®, a division of Kelley Kronenberg, is a premier law practice dedicated to protecting abused, disabled, and injured children nationwide, who are harmed in child welfare and disability systems. Their mission is to be fierce advocates for children's rights, to make personal injury recoveries for children injured, abused, or neglected by, or while in the care of, the governmental and private agencies who were supposed to protect them, and to drive systemic change in child welfare policy throughout the United States. Join us for a conversation with Partner Justin Grosz and John Walsh, Supervising Attorney for the Juvenile Advocacy Project at the Legal Aid Society of Palm Beach County, Inc..

**2:30pm – 3:30pm EST ONLINE PLENARY 3****OP3 Daubert for the Child Welfare Practitioner: Lessons from New Jersey**

*PRESENTER* **JILL S. TAYLOR, JD** – New Jersey Office of the Public Defender

In child welfare proceedings, agencies frequently depend solely on expert testimony to substantiate claims of abuse or neglect. However, the New Jersey Office of the Public Defender has effectively contested the admissibility and reliability of such scientific evidence. This session will provide a comprehensive analysis of the *Daubert* standard, along with an in-depth review of three pivotal cases in which New Jersey Public Defenders successfully excluded questionable diagnoses, testing methodologies, and professional standards. Additionally, the presenters will equip participants with practical litigation strategies to rigorously challenge the evidentiary foundation of expert testimony.

**4:00pm – 5:30pm EST ONLINE BREAKOUT E****OE1 Practicing Abolitionism: How Critical Connections and Solidarity Can Leverage the Movement to Abolish Family Policing**

*PRESENTERS* **COREY BEST** – Mining For Gold  
**SARAH KATZ, JD** – Temple University Beasley School of Law

What is the role of the legal profession in relation to the movement to abolish family policing? How can lawyers most effectively leverage the movement? This session's presenters each have more than 20 years' experience with family policing – Corey Best is a Black father with an advantaged analysis of the harms of family policing, and an experienced community organizer and movement leader; Sarah Katz is a white lawyer, experienced in representing parents and caregivers in and around the system, and the director of the Family Justice Clinic at Temple Law School. In solidarity, Corey and Sarah will engage in a demonstrative discussion regarding the practice of abolitionism and their work together, which will excavate and engage participants in answering these questions.

**OE2 Harm Reduction for Youth Impacted by CSE: A Guide for Multidisciplinary Partners in the Courtroom**

*PRESENTERS* **MAE ACKERMAN-BRIMBERG, JD, MSW** – National Center for Youth Law  
**MARÍA CONTRERAS, MPP** – National Center for Youth Law  
**SABLE HORTON** – WestCoast Children's Clinic

Many youth impacted by commercial sexual exploitation (CSE) interact with the court system. Traditional approaches have been punitive and emphasized removal from exploitation as the only method of keeping a youth safe. Harm reduction (HR) strategies engage and meet the unique needs of each youth, taking incremental steps to reduce harm while building trust and acknowledging the youth's own agency in decision making. HR approaches are collaborative, meaning multidisciplinary partners must work together alongside youth and families. This presentation will introduce a new Courtroom Guide to prepare attorneys, social workers, probation officers, bailiffs, mental health providers, advocates, and others for using HR strategies in the courtroom.

**ONLINE Conference Day 3: Friday, Nov 14, 2025**

**ALL SESSION TIMES ARE EASTERN STANDARD**

**10:00am - 11:30am EST ONLINE PLENARY 4**

**OP4 Let's Talk about Boundaries: Setting and Respecting Boundaries while Representing Children**

*PRESENTERS* SHOSHI GOLDFUS, JD, LCSW – Support Center for Child Advocates  
MARCÍA HOPKINS, MSW – Support Center for Child Advocates  
KASANDRA ROGIERS, JD, MPH – K.A. Rames, PC

Child-led representation requires that attorneys be able to recognize and respect a child's agency, autonomy, and culture, and to understand how trauma influences a child's ability to set, understand, and communicate boundaries. Attorneys must be able to communicate their own boundaries with an age-appropriate, trauma-informed, and culturally sensitive approach. In this session, participants will have the opportunity to reflect on their own boundaries and gain strategies to communicate about boundaries with clients and caregivers. Presenters will provide tools that address the influence of culture, bias, power, trauma, and positionality in these conversations and will discuss strategies for developing boundaries about role, work-life balance, availability, home visits, and emotional responses to representing children.

**12:00pm - 1:30pm EST ONLINE BREAKOUT F**

**OF1 Legal Representation for Kin: Maximizing Opportunities**

*PRESENTERS* SARAH HEDDEN, JD, MSW – Center for Elder Law and Justice  
STEVEN JESSEN-HOWARD, JD – ABA Center on Children and the Law  
PEARL PICKETT, JD – Alaska Legal Services Corporation

Kin caregivers often need legal assistance, including when the child welfare system is involved with their family. This session will begin with a discussion about the importance of legal representation for kin and then will then detail funding options to provide this representation for kin including newly accessible Title IV-E funds. The session will also highlight state and local program models for legal representation for kin. Participants will also receive resources to support legal representation of kin.

**OF2 Generational Trauma and Systemic Injustice: A Family's Struggle in Child Welfare**

*PRESENTER* MIESHA PARKER, LIVED EXPERIENCE EXPERT

This session explores the profound impact of systemic injustices faced by Black families within the child welfare system, focusing on intergenerational trauma, mental health challenges, and domestic violence. Through personal narratives, we will delve into the experiences of a young Black boy, his father, and his mother, each uniquely affected by systemic oppression. We will discuss the father's journey through the school-to-prison pipeline, the son's navigation of the child welfare system, and the mother's struggle with domestic violence and mental health. We will aim to propose comprehensive reforms to better support families and prevent cycles of trauma, exploring systemic changes needed to foster justice and healing.

**2:00pm - 3:30pm EST ONLINE PLENARY 5**

**OP5 Connected for Change: Crafting a New Era of Foster Sibling Advocacy**

*PRESENTERS* IVORY BENNETT, M.ED – Fostering Media Connections  
LILY COLBY, JD, FOUNDER – Fostering Sibling Connections  
ISABEL STASA, MPA, LIVED EXPERIENCE EXPERT – Foster Greatness; Doing Good Works

In this session, the facilitators, who have both lived and professional foster care experience, will lead an interactive effort to shift the paradigm on how we think about and advocate for sibling connections in foster care. Participants will

gain practical tools, strategies, and insights to advocate for sibling rights in various capacities – whether as siblings, attorneys, judges, caregivers, advocates, or allies. The session will explore the historical harms of sibling separation, with a focus on Black, Latinx, and Native children’s experiences. Attendees will also be engaged in an interactive activity to work together to draft a sample motion supporting sibling rights, answer important quiz questions, and earn prizes in a quest to change lives. Be prepared to laugh, learn, and do things differently.

3:30pm EST **Conference Concludes**



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# Children's Advocacy Institute

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DESERVES  
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Kim Dvorchak, CEO, NACC

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**Kim Dvorchak, JD, CEO**

[Kim.Dvorchak@NACCchildlaw.org](mailto:Kim.Dvorchak@NACCchildlaw.org)



Imagine a child...

...who faces a court of law that will determine the future of their family. A child depending on the legal system – to listen, to understand their needs, and to do the right thing.

Each year, thousands of children in foster care experience court proceedings because their caregivers have been accused of abuse or neglect. Too often, decisions are made without the child’s knowledge, participation, and preferences. Children in court have already endured the trauma of family separation, which is often compounded by inadequate services, disrupted education, and further maltreatment in certain foster care settings. But we can disrupt this trajectory – with legal advocacy, action, and your support.

Children in court:

- have a right to express themselves;
- need lawyers to stand up *with* them and *for* them;
- need their civil rights respected and protected.

Today, those rights are under attack. The **Children’s Justice Fund** is designed to protect the rights of children and youth by building NACC’s capacity to advance needed policy reforms and challenge attacks on children’s rights.

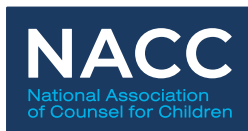
**Why This Fund? Why Now?**

For nearly 50 years, the National Association of Counsel for Children has been working to ensure that children are treated fairly and have a voice in court. We’ve made historic progress in advancing children’s rights, but now, political pressures and funding threats jeopardize the hard-won protections for vulnerable youth.

NACC’s Children’s Justice Fund will fight back – supporting zealous children’s advocacy in the face of growing challenges. NACC will continue to stand up for the civil rights of all youth, including racial justice, LGBTQ+ justice, gender justice, reproductive justice, and more.

**Join Us in Defending the Rights of Children**

This is our opportunity to stand up for children’s justice. Your support today will help create a world in which every child has the legal protection and advocacy they deserve.





## NACC CONGRATULATES THE 2025 PROMOTING EXCELLENCE AWARD RECIPIENTS!

NACC honors the champions who set the standard for excellence in child welfare legal advocacy. We present the Promoting Excellence Awards annually to individuals and organizations making significant contributions to the rights and wellbeing of children and families through excellence in legal representation.



*"Melissa exemplifies competence, dedication, and zeal for advancing client interests – all done with her trademark warm and approachable demeanor."*

### OUTSTANDING LEGAL ADVOCATE : **MELISSA COLANGELO**

Appellate Director, Children’s Law Center, Washington, DC

Since starting at Children’s Law Center in 2011, where she serves as Appellate Director, Melissa Colangelo has worked tirelessly to improve the course of child welfare law in Washington, DC – and increasingly influences appellate practice in our field across the country. Melissa’s work reflects a deep commitment to ensuring that legal decisions about children’s lives are reached with sufficient process and rigor, as well as grounded in evidence instead of assumptions – particularly around mental health, poverty, and race. She is guided by the principle that when you know better, you do better; and she has made it her mission to help courts, lawyers, and systems do just that.

Melissa has been the primary author of nearly 50 appellate pleadings and has led oral arguments – or mentored the attorney making oral arguments – for nearly every appellate case Children’s Law Center has worked on during her tenure. She approaches each case as an opportunity to have a dialogue with judges and ultimately advance the law in ways that improve children’s lives. In 2023, Melissa and her colleagues worked to overturn their client’s unnecessary removal into stranger foster care, and Melissa convinced DC’s highest court to publish its opinion, thereby establishing DC’s first binding precedent for what evidence is insufficient for the state to justify the harm of removing children from their families. This now serves as a national model.

Melissa is also a generous mentor and coach for the next generation of child welfare lawyers. She cares deeply about sharing her passion for and knowledge of appellate practice and principles. Her many nominators noted her kindness, strategic thinking, and sharp intellect. Melissa Colangelo embodies the very best of the vital, often-unsung work of appellate law that shapes precedent – and the lives of children – for the better.



*"She is wise beyond her years, a leader who commands respect and admiration."*

*"She continues to wow us every day not just with her fierce advocacy... but with the causes she has championed and the leadership she has demonstrated so early in her career."*

### OUTSTANDING NEW LAWYER : **SAMANTHA ZABO**

Attorney, Legal Aid Center of Southern Nevada

As an attorney with the Children’s Attorneys Project of Legal Aid Center of Southern Nevada, Samantha Zabo provides the empathetic and client-centered representation for children that NACC hopes every child welfare lawyer will achieve.

Despite carrying a large caseload, Samantha takes the time to build rapport with each client and steadfastly advocates for that child’s expressed wishes. She is a thoughtful attorney who researches best practices to improve her advocacy and who ensures she understands each client’s culture, hopes, and needs before stepping into the courtroom. She does not hesitate to respectfully hold all stakeholders, including the court, accountable to their responsibilities to the child. Samantha’s personal experience in the foster care system means she truly understands how important it is for the voice of a young person to be heard, and she is driven to help young people beyond an individual case. In addition to her direct representation, Samantha helped establish a youth advisory board to elevate youth voices and improve Nevada’s system. She also works on a team that helps youth and young adults aging out of the system prepare to live independently, and organizes career fairs to help them connect to community and job opportunities. It is a testament to her dedication and skill that Samantha received many nominations from colleagues, supervisors, judges, and even opposing counsel. One nominator said, "She is precisely the kind of lawyer this award was meant to recognize." NACC agrees!



**OUTSTANDING LAW STUDENT : JENNA MATTHEWS**

Nashville School of Law

Jenna Matthews has focused her legal education and burgeoning legal career on helping survivors of child abuse and neglect. As a law student at Nashville School of Law, and through her work at Dana Looper Law, she provides trauma-informed, client-centered support that focuses on the dignity and agency of the office's clients. Jenna's lived experience drives her empathetic approach and her dedication to elevating the voices of young people the system marginalizes.

Going beyond what is expected of a law student, she volunteers to lead community outreach, and guides the office to a more tailored approach to help find equitable solutions to systemic problems. Jenna is a natural leader who embodies the qualities that NACC hopes to see in the next generation of child welfare lawyers.

*"Her work reflects not just promise, but action – real, sustained action toward a more just and compassionate system for vulnerable children and families."*



**OUTSTANDING CHILDREN'S LAW OFFICE :  
CHILD ADVOCACY UNIT, DEFENDER ASSOCIATION OF PHILADELPHIA**

**MIMI LAVER, CHILD ADVOCACY UNIT CHIEF**

The Child Advocacy Unit of the Defender Association of Philadelphia is a model of client-centered, holistic advocacy for children and families. The Child Advocacy Unit operates on the foundational principle that family integrity is fundamental to the wellbeing of children. The organization's multidisciplinary teams of attorneys, social workers, and peer advocates reflect a commitment to NACC's best practices in both trauma-informed representation and also youth engagement. Their work shows that centering the voices of youth improves outcomes for young people and the organization.

The Child Advocacy Unit also helps improve the system – in the present and the future. It collaborates with sister organizations on vital appellate work, and with Drexel University Law School in a new legal clinic to train the next generation of advocates. The Child Advocacy Unit's amicus work also helps combat racial injustice, including on how termination of parental rights harms Black families. NACC salutes this office and its tremendous efforts.

*"The Child Advocacy Unit shows what a children's law office can achieve with the right vision, commitment, and community partnerships... The results are visible in Philadelphia Family Court every day."*



**DISTINGUISHED ACHIEVEMENT : HOWARD TALENFELD**

Partner, Justice for Kids Division, Kelley Kronenberg Attorneys at Law; Board President, Florida's Children First

For three decades, Howard Talenfeld has led efforts to seek justice and improve the child welfare system alongside young people in Florida. As an attorney, he works tirelessly on behalf of young people – particularly those harmed while in foster care, group homes, and institutions. Howard brings energy and care to his legal work, and he was a champion for elevating youth voice long before it was nationally recognized as best practice. As a leader, he has founded or co-founded multiple organizations that advocate for children and their rights including his law firm's Justice for Kids Division. Since 2002, Howard has been the founding Board President of Florida's Children First and helped create Florida Youth SHINE, an organization of lived experience experts working to change the culture of Florida's child welfare system.

As a policy advocate, Howard has improved Florida's system in countless ways. He drafted the legislation to create Florida's first children's law office pilot project, secured funding to help Legal Aid Service of Broward County create children's law offices, and wrote Florida's Foster Children Bill of Rights. Howard led legislative advocacy to help young people with lived experience in the system get stable housing in college and in life. He also led the legislative fight that created mandatory appointment of attorneys for kids with disabilities, children who are medically fragile, and victims of human trafficking. He continues to be a champion for the right to counsel in one of the largest states that does not guarantee it to all children. His many achievements are a shining example of the positive impact a relentless advocate can have on the lives of young people.

*"Howard Talenfeld has not only shaped the child welfare landscape in Florida – he has inspired a generation of advocates nationwide to never stop fighting for justice on behalf of our most vulnerable children."*

*"Thousands of young people like myself who could have become another statistic instead gained the confidence, leadership skills, and opportunities to pursue their dreams because of Howard's vision and volunteer efforts."*

**Read more about the awardees at [NACCchildlaw.org/2025-awardees](https://NACCchildlaw.org/2025-awardees).**

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## CONTINUING LEGAL EDUCATION

### CLE Accreditation Status and Details for the Online Conference

NACC has applied for and received CLE accreditation in 7 states (CA, CO, LA, MS, OH, PA, and TX) for live, real-time participation in the online conference. Details about approval in those states can be found in the chart below. More information including CLE FAQs and links to sign-in forms and session evaluations can be found on NACC’s conference attendee website. Recordings of all online sessions will be available to attendees, but NACC will not track or report attendance for on-demand viewing.

#### For Jurisdictions Not Listed Below

It is the responsibility of attendees to independently apply for CLE credit in any jurisdiction where NACC, as the sponsor, did not seek CLE accreditation. We encourage you to review the individual CLE application requirements in your jurisdiction as soon as possible.

Jurisdiction	ONLINE CONFERENCE: Wednesday, November 12 thru Friday, November 14, 2025
<b>CALIFORNIA</b>	<b>ACCREDITED</b>
	This course has been accredited by the State Bar of California for a maximum of <b>16.5 hours of credit</b> , including a maximum of: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• 1.5 hours of Wellness Competence credit (Session OP4)</li> </ul>
<b>COLORADO</b>	<b>ACCREDITED</b>
	This course is pending accreditation by the Colorado Board of Continuing Legal and Judicial Education for a maximum of <b>19.8 units of credit</b> , including a maximum of: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• 5.4 units of Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion credits (Sessions OA2, OC1, and OP4)</li> </ul>
<b>LOUISIANA</b>	<b>ACCREDITED</b>
	This course is approved by the MCLE Committee of the Louisiana State Bar Association for a maximum of <b>16.5 hours of general credit only</b> . <i>Note: The maximum credit limitation for online learning is 4 hours annually. Participation in excess of that will be reported but not applied to your transcript.</i>
<b>MISSISSIPPI</b>	<b>ACCREDITED</b>
	This course is approved by the Mississippi Commission on Continuing Legal Education for the state's maximum allowable distance-learning limit of <b>6 hours of general credit only</b> .
<b>OHIO</b>	<b>ACCREDITED</b>
	This program is approved by the Supreme Court of Ohio Commission on Continuing Legal Education for a maximum of <b>16.5 hours of CLE credit</b> , including a maximum of: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• 1.5 hours of Professional Conduct credit (Session OP4)</li> </ul>
<b>PENNSYLVANIA</b>	<b>ACCREDITED</b>
	This program is approved by the Pennsylvania Continuing Legal Education Board for a maximum of <b>16.5 hours of general substantive CLE credit only</b> . <i>Note: The maximum credit limitation for distance learning is 6 hours annually. Participation in excess of that will not be reported.</i>
<b>TEXAS</b>	<b>ACCREDITED</b>
	This course is approved for MCLE credit by the State Bar of Texas Committee on MCLE for a maximum of <b>16.5 hours of credit</b> , including a maximum of: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• 1.5 hours of Legal Ethics/Professional Responsibility credit (Session OP4)</li> </ul>

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& 2027!



**2026**

August 12  
thru August 14

Pre-Conference Aug 11

Portland, Oregon



**2027**

August 5  
thru August 7

Pre-Conference Aug 4

Denver, Colorado

