

CEO'S MESSAGE



KIM DVORCHAK, JD
CHIEF EXECUTIVE OFFICER,
NATIONAL ASSOCIATION OF
COUNSEL FOR CHILDREN

Kim.Dvorchak@NACCchildlaw.org

ON ETHICS, EVIDENCE, AND THE WORK AHEAD: REFLECTIONS UPON ENTERING NACC'S 50TH YEAR

Forty-nine years ago, a small group of lawyers and advocates had a vision: that children involved in the legal system deserved not just representation, but excellent representation — from attorneys who understood child welfare law as a specialty, who could investigate independently, argue skillfully, and fight for each child as an individual with rights and a future. That vision became the National Association of Counsel for Children.

As NACC enters its 50th year, and as I enter my 10th as its CEO, I find myself thinking about what it means to have built something that endures — and about the lawyers across this country who make that vision a reality every day. They show up in courtrooms and conference rooms, in under-resourced offices with overloaded case files, doing some of the most consequential legal work in the country. I am deeply proud to serve this community.

Pride, for me, has always come with humility and accountability. Humility requires acknowledging that the work is not finished — not by a long measure. Children still enter the child welfare system without counsel. Families still face separation without adequate legal support. And the system itself still produces outcomes that no one who believes in equal justice can accept. NACC exists to help practitioners learn, improve, and hold systems accountable.

WHAT WE DO, AND WHY IT MATTERS

NACC's work rests on three pillars: **promoting excellence** in legal representation through training, certification, and publications; **building community** among practitioners through membership, conferences, and convenings; and **advancing justice** for children and families through policy advocacy. I am especially proud of NACC's training faculty and staff. This year alone, our training calendar has included a [Professionalism and Ethics Symposium](#), [Foundations of Child Welfare Law and Practice](#) training, [Trial Skills](#) training, and webinars on attorney well-being, the racist history of the child welfare system, sibling connections, child welfare law specialist certification, and centering client mental health.

NACC's training docket represents one integrated commitment: that the best child welfare lawyers are those who combine technical legal skill with deep contextual understanding — of the law, of child development, of trauma and resilience, and of the structural forces that shape their clients' lives before a case ever reaches court.



GROUNDED IN LEGAL ETHICS

Every program NACC offers is grounded in the [ABA Model Rules of Professional Conduct](#), adopted in whole or in part in every state.

Rule 1.1 requires competence: not just legal knowledge, but the thoroughness and preparation reasonably necessary for the representation. For a child welfare attorney, that preparation includes understanding the institutional and historical context in which agency decisions are made. An attorney who accepts agency reports uncritically — without the tools to assess whether bias shaped the documentation, the referral, or the removal — is an attorney at risk of failing their client. NACC's training is designed to make attorneys more rigorous, not less.

Rule 1.3 requires diligence. Diligence means investigating independently, challenging unsupported agency conclusions, and pressing the state to meet its legal burden. Rule 1.7 requires loyalty: full, client-directed, client-centered representation in which the child's expressed interests are centered, not subordinated to any external agenda.

Rules 6.3 and 6.4 expressly recognize that lawyers may engage in legal services work and law reform alongside individual representation — that understanding systemic issues and advocating for individual clients are not competing obligations, but complementary ones.

And in 2022, the American Bar Association adopted [Resolution 606](#), which explicitly calls upon the legal profession to educate attorneys about anti-Black systemic racism within the child welfare system. NACC's racial justice training is not a departure from professional standards. It is a direct fulfillment of them. At a time when many institutions are retreating from this work out of fear or political pressure, NACC stands firm. Not because it is easy, but because it is right — and because the children and families we serve deserve nothing less.

FOLLOWING THE EVIDENCE

NACC's commitment to racial equity is not a political position. It is a response to documented, persistent, federally reported facts.

According to the most recent [AFCARS data](#), Black and African American children represent approximately 25% of the foster care population while comprising roughly 13.7%

An attorney who understands this landscape is not distracted by ideology. They are better positioned to cross-examine state assumptions, catch unsupported documentation, and ensure the state has met its legal burden before a family is separated. We cannot provide effective legal representation to our clients without understanding the context of their lives.



of the U.S. population. American Indian and Alaska Native children represent approximately 3% of children in foster care while comprising roughly 1.4% of the population. Black and Latinx families are more likely to be reported and investigated. Black and Native American youth are more likely to be separated from their families and placed in congregate care. These disparities have persisted for decades, across administrations of both parties, despite sustained policy attention.

WHERE WE ARE GOING

NACC strives to ensure that every child in foster care is safe, has access to legal counsel that fights for their individual interests, and that their attorney is supported by excellent supervisors and systems. These are not aspirational statements. They are the organizing principles of everything we build.

Our responsibility is to work forward so that when NACC marks its 100th anniversary, no child will be unsafe at home. No family will be unnecessarily torn apart. No child will go without skilled legal counsel. No family will face racial injustice in the legal system. And — the deepest hope of all — perhaps fewer families will be involved in the child welfare system in the first place, because the conditions that bring them there have been addressed with the same seriousness we bring to the courtroom.

The only way to get there is by improving our practice with honesty and integrity, following the research where it leads, and providing the highest caliber of advocacy possible. Our path forward reflects the wisdom of Maya Angelou: *Do the best you can until you know better. Then when you know better, you do better.*

I am grateful — for this community, for this work, and for the opportunity to keep making progress on the march toward justice.

Kim Dvorchak

Chief Executive Officer

National Association of Counsel for Children. ■

We are NACC.

Together we are

*Promoting
Excellence,*

*Building
Community,*

*Advancing
Justice*