TEN CORE PRINCIPLES
FOR PROVIDING QUALITY DELINQUENCY REPRESENTATION
THROUGH PUBLIC DEFENSE DELIVERY SYSTEMS

PREAMBLE

A. Goals of These Principles

The Ten Core Principles for Providing Quality Delinquency Representation through Public Defense Delivery Systems provide criteria by which a public defense delivery system may fully implement the holding of In re Gault. These Principles offer guidance to public defense leaders and policymakers regarding the role of public defenders, contract attorneys, or assigned counsel in delivering zealous, comprehensive and quality legal representation on behalf of children facing both delinquency and criminal proceedings. In applying these Principles, advocates should always be guided by defense counsel’s primary responsibility to zealously defend clients against the charges leveled against them and to protect their due process rights.

Delinquency cases are complex and their consequences have significant implications for children and their families. Therefore, every child client must have access to qualified, well-resourced defense counsel. These resources should include the time and skill to adequately communicate with a client so that lawyer and client can build a trust-based attorney-client relationship and so that the lawyer is prepared to competently represent the client’s interests. These Principles elucidate the parameters of this critical relationship already well established in legal ethics rules and opinions.

In 1995, the American Bar Association’s Juvenile Justice Center published A Call for Justice: An Assessment of Access to Counsel and Quality of Representation in Delinquency Proceedings, a national study that revealed major failings in juvenile defense across the nation. Since that time, numerous state-based assessments have documented in detail the manner in which these failings result in lifelong, harmful consequences for our nation’s children. These Principles provide public defense leaders and policymakers a guide to rectifying systemic deficits and to providing children charged with criminal behavior the high quality counsel to which they are entitled.

B. The Representation of Children and Adolescents is a Specialty

Public defense delivery systems must recognize that children and adolescents are different from adults. Advances in brain research cited favorably by the Supreme Court in Roper v. Simmons confirm that children and young adults do not possess the same cognitive, emotional, decision-making or behavioral capacities as adults. Public defense delivery systems must provide training regarding the stages of child and adolescent development.

Public defense delivery systems must emphasize that juvenile defense counsel has an obligation to maximize each client’s participation in his or her own case in order to ensure that the client understands the court process and to facilitate informed decision making by the client. Defense attorneys owe their juvenile clients the same duty of loyalty that adult criminal clients enjoy. This coextensive duty of loyalty requires the juvenile defense attorney to advocate for the child client’s expressed interests with the legal knowledge, skill, thoroughness and preparation reasonably necessary for the representation.

C. Public Defense Delivery Systems Must Pay Particular Attention to the Most Vulnerable and Over-Represented Groups of Children in the Delinquency System

Because research has demonstrated that involvement in the juvenile court system increases the likelihood that a child will subsequently be convicted and incarcerated as an adult, public defense delivery systems should pay special attention to providing high quality representation for the most vulnerable and over-represented groups of children in the delinquency system.

Nationally, children of color are severely over-represented at every stage of the juvenile justice process. Defenders must zealously advocate for the elimination of the disproportionate representation of minority youth in juvenile courts and detention facilities.

Children with mental health and developmental disabilities are also over-represented in the juvenile justice system. Defenders must address these needs and secure appropriate assistance for these clients as an essential component of quality legal representation.

Drug- and alcohol-dependent juveniles and those dually diagnosed with addiction and mental health disorders are more likely to become involved with the juvenile justice system. Defenders must advocate for appropriate treatment services for these clients.

Research shows that the population of girls in the delinquency system is increasing, and that girls’ issues are distinct from boys’. Gender-based interventions and the programmatic needs of girls in the juvenile delinquency system, who have frequently suffered from abuse and neglect, must be assessed and appropriate gender-based services developed and funded.

The special issues presented by lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender youth require increased awareness and training to ensure that advocacy on their behalf addresses their needs.
Ten Principles


A. Competent and diligent representation is the bedrock of a juvenile defense attorney’s responsibilities.9
B. The public defense delivery system ensures that children do not waive appointment of counsel and that defense counsel are assigned at the earliest possible stage of the delinquency proceedings.10
C. The public defense delivery system recognizes that the delinquency process is adversarial and provides children with continuous legal representation throughout the proceedings including, but not limited to, detention, pre-trial motions or hearings, adjudication, disposition, post-disposition, probation, appeal, ex-pungement and sealing of records.
D. The public defense delivery system includes the active participation of the private bar or conflict office whenever a conflict of interest arises for the primary defender service provider or when the caseload justifies the need for outside counsel.11

2. The Public Defense Delivery System Recognizes that Legal Representation of Children is a Specialized Area of the Law.

A. The public defense delivery system recognizes that representing children in delinquency proceedings is a complex specialty in the law that is different from, but equally as important as, the representation of adults in criminal proceedings. The public defense delivery system further acknowledges the specialized nature of representing juveniles prosecuted as adults following transfer/waiver proceedings.12
B. The public defense delivery system leadership promotes respect for juvenile defense team members and values the provision of quality, zealous and comprehensive delinquency representation services.
C. The public defense delivery system encourages experienced attorneys to provide delinquency representation and strongly discourages use of delinquency representation as a training assignment for new attorneys or future adult court advocates.


A. The public defense delivery system encourages juvenile specialization without limiting access to promotions, financial advancement, or personnel benefits for attorneys and support staff.
B. The public defense delivery system provides a professional work environment and adequate operational resources such as office space, furnishings, technology, confidential client interview areas14 and current legal research tools. The system includes juvenile representation resources in budgetary planning to ensure parity in the allocation of equipment and resources.


A. The public defense delivery system supports requests for expert services throughout the delinquency process whenever individual juvenile case representation requires these services for quality representation. These services include, but are not limited to, evaluation by and testimony of mental health professionals, education specialists, forensic evidence examiners, DNA experts, ballistics analysts and accident reconstruction experts.


A. The leadership of the public defense delivery system monitors defense counsel’s workload to promote quality representation. The workload of public defense attorneys, including appointed and other work, should never be so large that it interferes with competent and diligent representation or limits client contact.15 Factors that impact the number of cases an attorney can appropriately handle include case complexity and available support services.
B. The leadership of the public defense delivery system adjusts attorney case assignments and resources to guarantee the continued delivery of quality juvenile defense services.

6. The Public Defense Delivery System Supervises and Systematically Reviews Juvenile Staff According to National, State and/or Local Performance Guidelines or Standards.

A. The public defense delivery system provides supervision and management direction for attorneys and team members who provide defense services to children.16
B. The leadership of the public defense delivery system clearly defines the organization’s vision and adopts guidelines consistent with national, state and/or local performance standards.17
C. The public defense delivery system provides systematic reviews for all attorneys and staff representing juveniles, whether they are contract defenders, assigned counsel or employees of defender offices.

7. The Public Defense Delivery System Provides and Requires Comprehensive, Ongoing Training and Education for All Attorneys and Support Staff Involved in the Representation of Children.

A. The public defense delivery system recognizes juvenile delinquency defense as a specialty that requires continuous training18 in unique areas of the law. The public defense delivery system provides and mandates training on topics including detention advocacy, litigation and trial skills, dispositional planning, post-dispositional practice, educational rights, appellate advocacy and procedure and administrative hearing representation.
B. Juvenile team members have a comprehensive understanding of the jurisdiction’s juvenile law and procedure, and the collateral consequences of adjudication and conviction.
C. Team members receive training to recognize issues that arise in juvenile cases and that may require assistance from specialists in other disciplines. Such disciplines include, but are not limited to:
   1. Administrative appeals
   2. Child welfare and entitlements
   3. Special Education
   4. Dependency court/abuse and neglect court process
   5. Immigration
   6. Mental health, physical health and treatment
   7. Drug addiction and substance abuse
D. Training for team members emphasizes understanding of the needs of juveniles in general and of specific populations of juveniles in particular, including in the following areas:
   1. Child and adolescent development
   2. Racial, ethnic and cultural understanding
   3. Communicating and building attorney-client relationships with children and adolescents
   4. Ethical issues and considerations of juvenile representation
   5. Competency and capacity
   6. Role of parents/guardians
7. Sexual orientation and gender identity awareness
8. Transfer to adult court and waiver hearings
9. Zero tolerance, school suspension and expulsion policies

E. Team members are trained to understand and use special programs and resources that are available in the juvenile system and in the community, such as
1. Treatment and problem solving courts
2. Diversionary programs
3. Community-based treatment resources and programs
4. Gender-specific programming

The Public Defense Delivery System Has an Obligation to Present Independent Treatment and Disposition Alternatives to the Court.

A. The public defense delivery system ensures that attorneys consult with clients and, independent from court or probation staff, actively seek out and advocate for treatment and placement alternatives that serve the unique needs and dispositional requests of each child, consistent with the client’s expressed interests.

B. The leadership and staff of the public defense delivery system works in partnership with other juvenile justice agencies and community leaders to minimize custodial detention and the incarceration of children and to support the creation of a continuum of community-based, culturally sensitive and gender-specific treatment alternatives.

C. The public defense delivery system provides independent post-disposition monitoring of each child’s treatment, placement or program to ensure that rehabilitative needs are met. If clients’ expressed needs are not effectively addressed, attorneys are responsible for intervention and advocacy before the appropriate authority.


A. The public defense delivery system recognizes that access to education and to an appropriate educational curriculum is of paramount importance to juveniles facing delinquency adjudication and disposition.

B. The public defense delivery system advocates, either through direct representation or through collaborations with community-based partners, for the appropriate provision of the individualized educational needs of clients.

The Public Defense Delivery System Promotes Fairness and Equity For Children.

A. The public defense delivery system demonstrates strong support for the right to counsel and due process in delinquency courts to promote a juvenile justice system that is fair, non-discriminatory and rehabilitative.

B. The public defense delivery system recognizes that disproportionate representation of minority youth in the juvenile justice system is contrary to notions of fairness and equality. The public defense delivery system works to draw attention to, and zealously advocates for the elimination of, disproportionate minority contact.

The original Principles were developed over an eighteen-month period through a collaborative venture between the National Juvenile Defender Center (NJDC) and the American Council of Chief Defenders, a section of the National Legal Aid and Defender Association (NLADA). NLADA officially adopted the original Principles on December 4, 2004. NJDC and NLADA collaborated on additional revisions to release this updated version, which NLDA officially adopted on June 4, 2008.

For the purposes of these Principles, the term “public defense delivery system” denotes legal delivery systems that provide defense services to indigent juveniles facing delinquency proceedings. This term is meant to encompass public defender offices, contract, appointed, and conflict counsel, law school clinics, and non-profit legal providers.
The National Juvenile Defender Center and the National Legal Aid & Defender Association are pleased to distribute *Ten Core Principles for Providing Quality Delinquency Representation Through Public Defense Delivery Systems*, adopted in partnership with the American Council of Chief Defenders in December 2004 and revised and reissued in July 2008.

We hope and trust that they will prove useful in future efforts to reform and improve juvenile indigent defense systems across the country.

Please contact NJDC at (202) 452-0010 or inquiries@njdc.info with any questions or requests for assistance.