



FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE  
Thursday, June 7, 2018

CONTACT: [inquiries@njdc.info](mailto:inquiries@njdc.info)  
202-452-0010

**NATIONAL JUVENILE DEFENDER CENTER**  
**RELEASES ASSESSMENT OF DC JUVENILE DEFENSE SYSTEM**

**WASHINGTON, DC** — The National Juvenile Defender Center (NJDC) today released an assessment of access to and quality of juvenile defense counsel in the District of Columbia, available at <http://njdc.info/district-of-columbia-assessment/>. NJDC’s assessments, which are comprehensive examinations of the systemic and institutional barriers that prevent children from receiving high-quality legal representation, are part of a nationwide effort to improve juvenile defense across the country.

“The District’s juvenile defense system has many exemplary elements,” said NJDC Executive Director Mary Ann Scali. “Youth are almost always represented by an attorney at their court hearings, many of those attorneys provide the type of representation you would want if this were your child, there are more resources for juvenile defense than in many other systems, and there is a strong culture of due process. However, there are shortcomings the District must address to fully uphold children’s constitutional rights and ensure youth and family success.”

The DC Assessment notes ways the District’s juvenile defense system can improve and provides recommendations for reforms:

**Improve youth access to counsel post-disposition.** While the Assessment found that youth in DC’s juvenile court are represented from initial hearings (the juvenile equivalent of arraignments) through disposition (or juvenile sentencing), youth have limited access to counsel after disposition, while they may be in custody or under supervision and as they transition back to their homes and communities after court involvement. The Assessment recommends that DC ensure youth have access to counsel while in out-of-home placement, during reentry, and while under supervision.

“The time period after the court case is over, when youth are completing their court orders and leaving the juvenile system, is an absolutely critical point that determines the success of the youth and the impact of the system’s intervention in young people’s lives,” said Scali. “What distinguishes the juvenile system from the criminal system is the idea that juvenile court involvement is not punishment, but an opportunity to set youth up to succeed. But as young people are leaving DC’s juvenile system, they too often do not have access to lawyers to help them navigate legal barriers to success.”

**Provide additional support to CJA panel attorneys.** Legal representation is provided to youth in DC by the Public Defender Service (PDS), law school clinics, and private attorneys who are members of the Criminal Justice Act Panel (known as CJA attorneys or panel attorneys). The Assessment found that PDS attorneys and law school clinic students receive necessary support from their offices, but that CJA attorneys, who represent the majority of youth in the District and most of whom practice individually, lack necessary structural and institutional supports, including training. The Assessment recommends that the District increase the organizational, monitoring, and leadership capabilities of the CJA Panel.

**Stop the indiscriminate shackling of children in court.** While DC’s juvenile court has adopted an administrative order that prohibits the shackling of youth when they appear in court unless there is a demonstrated safety need for an individual child to be restrained, indiscriminate shackling of children remains rampant. Youth, including those facing non-criminal charges such as running away from home, regularly appear in court with handcuffs, belly chains, and leg irons. Shackling children causes long-lasting psychological harms, impedes attorney-client communication, and runs counter to the rehabilitative ideals of the juvenile court. The Assessment recommends that system stakeholders implement the court’s existing rule to provide individualized assessments of whether shackling is warranted for each child.

The Assessment also recommends that DC’s juvenile justice system improve the collection and reportability of data, address clear racial disparities, and ensure that youth receive legal representation that is individualized and rooted in adolescent development.

“We greatly appreciate the cooperation of the District’s juvenile justice system stakeholders as we conducted this assessment,” Scali said. “We’re looking forward to working with defense attorneys, judges, and others to continue to make improvements and to ensure all of DC’s youth receive access to the high-quality legal representation they need and deserve.”

The DC Assessment is the 23rd assessment NJDC has conducted. Assessments are available on NJDC’s website: <http://njdc.info/our-work/juvenile-indigent-defense-assessments/>.

###

*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, we provide national leadership on juvenile defense issues with a focus on the deprivation of young people's rights in the court system. For more information, please visit our website at [www.njdc.info](http://www.njdc.info).*