

# Transforming Juvenile Justice during the COVID Pandemic

■ By Susan Vivian Mangold

Juvenile Law Center and many of our partner agencies from the Delivery of Legal Services Committee have been actively involved in a variety of long-term strategies to transform the juvenile justice system in Philadelphia and throughout Pennsylvania. The number of incarcerated youth in the Commonwealth has steadily decreased every year since 2016, but the COVID pandemic brings added urgency to our local and state-wide demands for reform.

At the August public meeting of the Child Welfare Oversight Board, Philadelphia's Department of Human Services shared data that Black children account for 42% of the city's population of children but 79% of youth in delinquency congregate care. With the risk of COVID-19, especially in placements with large numbers of youth, and with the racial disparities so extreme, more needs to be done in our city and across the Commonwealth to decarcerate and invest in youth and their families.

When COVID hit this spring, Juvenile Law Center filed a King's Bench petition calling on the Pennsylvania Supreme Court to issue guidance to the lower courts with the goal of releasing youth from confinement. The PA

Supreme Court denied the petition, but directed local president judges to establish strategies to limit detention and release more youth from confinement, which has resulted in the release of hundreds of youth. District Attorney Larry Krasner's office and the Defender Association have



worked to limit the use of incarceration for youth entering the system, and similar efforts are underway in many counties—but more needs to be done to safely release youth and support their families.

Informal adjudication is an option to avoid formal court processes. At Pennsylvania Juvenile Justice Task Force meetings in July, data revealed that fines were assessed in 60% of cases with informal adjudication. Ninety-one percent of probation officers said they do not consider ability to pay in assessing those fines. With the economic stress on families especially due to the economic impact of the public health crisis, juvenile fines impose an

undue burden and are a hidden, lasting impact of justice system involvement. Especially during COVID, a moratorium should be placed on all fines and fees.

The Task Force further reported on disparities at each stage of the juvenile justice system. For youth under a court-ordered agreement that suspends their case without formal adjudication and places them under probation supervision, white youth are under decrees for an average of 20 months while Black youth are under decrees and supervision for an average of 27 months. This prolonged supervision is another hidden impact that entangles youth, especially Black youth, in the system with human and economic costs to the community.

Join us in participating in the public meetings of the Pennsylvania Juvenile Justice Task Force and learn about the racial disparities and human and economic impact of our juvenile justice system. We must all work together to transform the system from incarceration and long-term consequences to investments in youth and families.

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## PRO BONO SPOTLIGHT - PHILADELPHIA VOLUNTEER LAWYERS FOR THE ARTS

# Advocating for the Arts

■ By Ashley Catalano-Leckerman

When I began working at Blank Rome LLP, I was thrilled with how encouraged we were to participate in pro bono activities. Blank Rome not only encourages and supports pro bono participation, it also assists its attorneys with finding meaningful pro bono opportunities that each attorney is passionate about. As a young corporate attorney who once considered a career in the performing arts rather than law, Philadelphia Volunteer Lawyers for the Arts was my perfect pro bono fit. PVLA has been a resource for Philadelphia's arts and cultural community since 1978, providing pro-bono and low-cost legal assistance to artists, inventors, and arts and culture organizations in the Philadelphia region and statewide.

I was tasked with assisting a nonprofit modern dance repertory company in Philadelphia by drafting the legal documentation necessary for the dance company to receive certain assets from a recently deceased famous dancer's foundation in New York City. PVLA's client was thrilled to hear that a former ballerina was taking on her case, as I could truly appreciate the impact these assets

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would have on her dance repertory company.

However, this case was not so simple as just drafting a few documents. The case required analyzing the organizational documents of each of the entities involved in the transfer, participating in negotiations with the lawyers representing the dance foundation, and even contacting the New York Public Library, as PVLA's client planned to donate various assets to the Lincoln Center. Despite a few hurdles and countless emails and phone calls, the client remained optimistic and eager to help, and we were able to successfully negotiate and transfer the assets.

The most rewarding part of the experience was seeing how happy and grateful the client was after the transaction was completed and knowing that my small contribution would help an incredible dance company and artist

continue to thrive. I hope to see a performance by the company one day in the future.

PVLA has been such an incredible organization to volunteer with, as it allows me to give back to a thriving arts community that is so important to me in the city that I love most. I am excited to continue working with PVLA and highly recommend this organization to any attorney searching for their next pro bono opportunity.

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