

# What young people are saying about juvenile defense

LEARNING FROM THE EXPERIENCES OF FORMER YOUTH CLIENTS

## Youth voices are critical TO CHANGING THE CURRENT SYSTEM OF JUVENILE INJUSTICE



The perspectives of young people with system experience are particularly important in efforts to strengthen and improve juvenile defense advocacy. With the state, prosecutors, victims, witnesses, law enforcement, and probation officers on the other side of the table, youth rely on their defender to hear and honor their voices and ensure they are full participants in their own defense.

All too often, however, despite best intentions, juvenile defenders are unaware of how young people are experiencing the legal system. Members of The Annie E. Casey 2019-21 Juvenile Justice Youth Advisory Council were willing to share personal experiences and offer candid input on ways to strengthen the defense of youth. Council members are young adults ages 18 to 25 who have current or past experience with the juvenile legal system.

Following are quotes from five youth council members about their experience with their juvenile defender. While this is a summary of some of the key themes found in the individual stories of each youth, these perspectives can be used to improve future attorney-client relationships, better understand clients' stated interest, differentiate the role of the defense attorney from other actors in the system, and ultimately improve advocacy for children in the juvenile legal system.

## I was not a part of the proceeding OR MY DEFENSE TEAM

"He didn't fight for me."

"Hear me out and fight for what I want."

"Take time to listen and not just send your law clerk or someone else to have a conversation with me."

"Empower young people to be engaged in their proceedings."

"Don't just tell me what you recommend. Give me all the options. Take my feedback. Let me be involved. Explain what everything means."

# I did not understand

## WHAT WAS GOING ON IN COURT OR THE ROLE OF MY ATTORNEY

"I was confused because it was my first case and I didn't know how it was supposed to work."

"Prior to going to court, explain the different scenarios that could happen."

"Walk me through all the alternatives, all the perspectives, what is a penal code, what are these acronyms? Why won't the judge look at me when I'm talking?"

"I was not comfortable at first. I didn't understand what was going on, what their role was, the terms used in court. She would just present to me my options and from there I really didn't open up."

"Communicate in kid friendly language. I didn't think to question what she was saying. I just assumed I wasn't supposed to understand, and things were going over my head. I just didn't care because I didn't understand."

"I didn't understand what was going on being a young kid at 15."

"They used a lot of terminology that no 14-year-old knows. Nothing was explained in court or out of court."

"Take my feedback. Let me be involved. Explain what everything means."



# My case was not as important

## AS THE OTHER CASES MY ATTORNEY HAD

"Their hearts are in the right place, but they don't have the capacity. They can't put as much into the case because they don't have the capacity."

"Public defenders have a lot on their plate, and she wasn't present with me. Just reading the case out loud, and asked surface level questions. I gave yes and no responses and there was no follow-up or digging deeper. She was on her phone and not making eye contact. Attorneys really need to be present, engaging, and respectful of how the young person feels."

"The attorney would try to apologize by mentioning that she is working on other cases. Don't use other cases to justify why you're not making progress with my case. They look at us like case numbers and not actual people. My case may not be as severe as others, but I still need to be kept out of the system and rehabilitated, not just the severe cases. Attorneys need to treat every young person and their case with equal respect, attention, and understanding."

"My attorney didn't know my name in court. I think it's because they have a lot of cases. [My attorney] didn't understand what getting committed was and [he] just gave me his card."

# I was not comfortable

## TALKING WITH MY ATTORNEY

"I had no interaction with the attorney."

"I met him the day of court."

"I think they just have time to get straight to the point and not really get to know you and establish trust. They need to establish that they are there for us and there to help us get out of the system."

"I felt rushed and uncomfortable."

"The attorney made me feel like I did something wrong and that he was working for THEM."

"I met with my attorney about five times. We always met right before going in the courtroom."

"There weren't many conversations. We talked in court and on the phone. He canceled court and I didn't understand why."

"Can the process be slowed down?"