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Juvenile Delinquency: The Case for Specialty Training

By Sue Burrell

Each year, more than 100,000 young people in California face juvenile court delinquency petitions alleging violations of the law - more than in any other state. Most are represented by an attorney - and for good reason. The potential consequences of juvenile court proceedings are serious and far-reaching. A young person found "unfit" by the juvenile court will be prosecuted in criminal court and held to adult criminal penalties, including imprisonment up to life without the possibility of parole. Those prosecuted in juvenile court may be held up to age 25. They may also suffer adult consequences including the reporting of their DNA and records to the California Dept. of Justice, sex offender registration, and use of juvenile adjudications as "strikes" for sentencing enhancement.

Juveniles adjudicated for less serious offenses may suffer incarceration, educational disruption, and stigma. Depending on the offense, they may find it difficult to get back into school, apply for financial aid, join the military, adjust immigration status, live in public housing, hold a driver's license, or successfully navigate employment interviews. The cloud of a juvenile adjudication may follow them for their entire lives.

Apart from the consequences of juvenile adjudications for the individual, there are societal issues at stake. Although the juvenile system is designed to rehabilitate, this does not always happen. Young people who go through the system with unaddressed mental health problems, substance abuse issues, family problems, or educational deficits are more likely to reoffend. Similarly, those who are dispatched to programs or facilities that are poorly matched to their needs are destined to fail and to penetrate further into the justice system. Those who are unnecessarily incarcerated experience negative peer influences; interference with critical stages of adolescent development; and an inability to engage in the very kinds of activities and relationships needed to build success in the community.

Those coming before the juvenile court are overwhelmingly youth of color - most often from poor or struggling families. Compared to the general youth population, they have much higher prevalence of developmental disabilities, mental illness, and histories of trauma and abuse. Many of them have not yet or are just reaching adolescence - one out of five is 14-years-old or younger.

The integrity of juvenile justice system depends on the ability of its component parts to skillfully and zealously play their role. If defense counsel lacks the skills to fully investigate, prepare, and litigate the case it is much more likely that an unjust result will be reached.

The required skill set for competent juvenile delinquency defense is considerably different and broader than that needed for adult criminal defense. Juvenile defense counsel need to know criminal law, but also must be aware of separate juvenile standards for fundamental issues such as competence to stand trial, confessions, and capacity to commit a crime. They must master the extensive body of California's Juvenile Court Law, with its own terminology, procedures, timelines and legal standards. Counsel must also advocate with knowledge of the different purpose of juvenile court proceedings - which requires that youth receive care, treatment and guidance in accordance with their individual needs, and that they be held accountable for their actions, but without retributive punishment. (California Welfare & Institutions Code Section 202.) They must have the skills to explain complex legal principles to their clients in an understandable way, and assert their clients' expressed wishes even when others would like to impose their own views of the child's "best interest." Competent representation requires counsel to be familiar with the kinds of services or programs that produce good rehabilitative results, and the providers available to provide those services. It requires counsel to engage families and assure that needed supports are in place to ensure success. In performing this work, juvenile defenders must understand and be able to apply the principles of adolescent development; education and special education law; and mental health law. In addition, in juvenile court, representation does not end at the time of "sentencing" (California Rules

of Court, Rule 5.663.) Because the goal of the juvenile justice system is to actually address the factors that led to juvenile court involvement, counsel must monitor post-disposition progress in implementing the court's orders and take appropriate action if there are problems.

California has provided for the appointment of counsel in delinquency cases since before *In re Gault* (1967) 387 U.S. 1, recognized it as a constitutional right. But the right to counsel means very little if lawyers are dispatched to courtrooms without the proper training and knowledge to competently represent their young clients. California's 2008 *Juvenile Delinquency Court Assessment* (Administrative Office of the Courts, Center for Families, Children, and the Courts), observed that "...having experienced, well-trained attorneys is critical to ensure the fair processing of delinquency cases and quality representation for youth who enter the delinquency system." Training is only one of several broader issues affecting the quality of representation - including professional status, indigent defense resources, and juvenile system accountability - but it is a great place to start.

Training is necessarily decentralized because California juvenile delinquency representation is county-based, and a variety of structures are used. Approximately two-thirds of juveniles are represented by public defenders, and the remainder are represented by a combination of panel attorneys, contract office attorneys, or privately retained counsel.

How well prepared are these counsel to perform the highly skilled, responsible role required to assure competent representation for young people coming before the court? The Pacific Juvenile Defender Center undertook a training survey of juvenile defense counsel at two statewide conferences in 2009. More than 200 attorneys responded, representing 38 of the 58 counties and several indigent appellate defense offices. Of those responding, 11 percent had been practicing for two years or fewer; 24 percent for three to ten years; and 65 percent had been engaged in juvenile delinquency practice for more than 10 years. While this was a somewhat self-selecting group because these attorneys were at training conferences, their responses provide a window into juvenile defender training and resources across the state.

For 15 percent, the conference at which they were surveyed was their first training aimed directly at juvenile defense counsel; and 35 percent had attended three or fewer trainings aimed directly at juvenile defense counsel. Those percentages were higher for attorneys in practice for two years or fewer.

More significantly, 45 percent of those responding reported receiving no training when they started representing young people in delinquency proceedings. Of those, there was an even split between public defender and non-defender responses. Of those who received some training, 43 percent received one day or less.

Among those surveyed, 50 percent work in offices that do not provide ongoing training specific to juvenile defense practice, and the percentage is much higher for those who are not in public defender offices. In offices that provide it, training frequency ranges fairly evenly between months, quarterly, twice yearly and annually. Most offices providing juvenile training require attendance, but 21 percent do not, and 3 percent of respondents did not know if they are required to attend training.

Of those responding, 71 percent are not paid or reimbursed for attending training, and 88 percent of non-public defender counsel do not receive payment for attending training. Of those whose offices provide payment, the arrangements vary, but include individual annual training allotments; time off to attend the training; reimbursement for conference registration; and travel expenses or combinations of those things.

Seventy percent of survey respondents indicated that their office has no juvenile practice manual or they do not know if such a manual exists. Eighty-two percent responded that they work in offices that lack practice standards (expected practices) for attorneys handling juvenile cases, or do not know if such practice standards exist.

Only 13 percent of those responding were members of the Pacific Juvenile Defender Center's statewide juvenile defender listserv, which provides the only delinquency specific forum for juvenile defense counsel to discuss legal questions and developments in relevant case law and legislation. The figures were even lower for non-public defenders (4 percent) and those practicing in delinquency cases for less than two years (3 percent).

The survey responses confirm that some juvenile defense counsel practice in offices that provide ample training and ongoing resources, but many do not. Training at the very beginning of juvenile defense careers is minimal at best in many offices. The results suggest that well-meaning, hard working, but professionally ill-prepared attorneys represent all too many young people in our system.

In 2009, a statewide survey of juvenile defense counsel conducted by the Pacific Juvenile Defender Center revealed serious deficiencies in training among some practitioners. When asked about what kinds of resources and training materials they would like to have, the lawyers surveyed enthusiastically requested everything suggested. They wanted quarterly regional training meetings. They wanted telephonic and on-line lunchtime MCLE trainings that they can do from their office. They wanted access to juvenile subject matter experts; practice materials; list serves and hotlines to people who can provide trial support and information about programs and service; and legal updates. They ranked the importance of dozens of training topics. Their individual comments reflected practitioners who are stretched to the limits of their capacity and who want and desperately need all the help they can get.

The survey results showing deficits in training and professional support are actually quite consistent with this clamoring for help. While there are half a dozen California juvenile law conferences each year directed either all or in part to the needs of juvenile delinquency attorneys, they are not evenly distributed around the state. Los Angeles hosts the majority of such conferences, with some conferences alternating between San Francisco and San Diego. Monterey also holds an annual conference. While this is wonderful for some practitioners, for those in the small counties of Northern California; those in the big counties in the eastern part of Southern California, and those in or near Sacramento; attendance at existing conferences is expensive and time consuming.

This survey was performed against a backdrop of increasing self-scrutiny by juvenile practitioners and broader efforts to improve the juvenile justice system as a whole. We wanted to know the actual status of professional training so we would know what needs to be done to make it more broadly available and more responsive to the needs of juvenile defense counsel. We now have good baseline information and a vehicle for developing helpful additions to California's training universe.

The Pacific Juvenile Defender Center has recently become the locus for California's work in the John D. Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation's Juvenile Indigent Defense Action Network (JIDAN). With JIDAN teams in New Jersey, Massachusetts, Florida, and other states where MacArthur is engaged in juvenile justice reform, California's team will develop and implement strategies to enhance the capacity of juvenile defense counsel. These efforts will unfold over the next two years. Developing a statewide resource center with enhanced training will form a central part of the work.

Already, the Center has compiled a statewide contact list for attorneys representing children in juvenile delinquency cases, and has launched a Web site with a "members only" resource bank. The defender list serv will be re-launched shortly, with an invitation to every identified juvenile defense attorney in the state. This is important because, again, many counties do not have public defender offices, and those representing youth through panel appointments or through contract offices may have only sporadic access to professional support. The resource bank and list serv will provide access to a much bigger professional community for defense counsel to ask questions and have access to state-of-the-art practice materials.

In addition, as part of its MacArthur JIDAN work, the Center has created an Expert's Corner composed of subject matters experts around the state who are available to answer listserv questions or provide off line trial support to Pacific Juvenile Defender Center members.

The Pacific Juvenile Defender Center has also created a committee structure to coordinate training statewide agendas with the organizations offering juvenile defender training, including staff at the Center for Families Children and the Courts (who annually present the Beyond the Bench Conference); the California Public Defenders Association, the Los Angeles County Public Defenders Office; and Loyola Law School's Center for Juvenile Law & Policy. In November 2009, the Pacific Juvenile Defender Center hosted an all-day training at Loyola Law School, featuring an agenda developed entirely from the survey responses.

Over the next year, the Center will focus its efforts on reaching out to juvenile defense counsel in parts of the state that make it difficult to attend existing trainings. Plans are under way to provide telephonic and on-line MCLE trainings on topics of interest to those defenders, and regional in-person trainings. Long term plans include the development of a California Juvenile Defense Practice Manual and a training academy for attorneys new to juvenile defense.

In terms of systemic goals, it is clear that specific requirements and support for training for juvenile delinquency defense must be built into indigent defense systems and agency funding streams. Training must be designed to reach counsel unable to attend current offerings because of distance and cost.

California is not alone in this work. As part of the MacArthur Foundation's JIDAN initiative, we can learn from and benefit from colleagues all over the country engaging in similar endeavors. The Pacific Juvenile Defender Center is actively engaged in work on recommendations stemming from the *2008 Juvenile Delinquency Court Assessment* (Administrative Office of the Courts, Center for Families, Children, and the Courts). And in February 2010, California juvenile delinquency practitioners will take part in the U.S. Dept. of Justice National Symposium on Indigent Defense: Looking Back, Looking Forward 2000-2010, which will look at the past and future of indigent juvenile and criminal defense.

For each child whose needs are promptly recognized and addressed, counties and the State will save tens of thousands of dollars in reduced recidivism and associated costs to victims, the courts and ultimately, the taxpayers. Juvenile defense counsel play a key role in assuring that this happens.

No child should have a lawyer who started practicing with one day or less of training in juvenile delinquency practice. No child should have a lawyer who lacks meaningful access to ongoing delinquency training and support. In the experience of the Pacific Juvenile Defender Center, a relatively small investment may pay big dividends in developing professional capacity and assuring competent representation of young people in the delinquency system.

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