

IMPACT REPORT

2025

*Every right defended. Every voice heard.*

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# MESSAGE FROM THE EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR

In 2025, the rights of children and youth were tested and violated, repeatedly and by design.

Across the country, the supports and protections that children and families count on were weakened or stripped away. Federal agencies shifted priorities, leaving millions of people vulnerable. States pushed policies placing children at risk. Too often, young people were excluded from decisions that directly impacted their safety, education, health, and future.

The National Center for Youth Law met that moment with clarity and strength.

We did so because we believe that, as democratic institutions face significant threats, prioritizing the rights, well-being, and dignity of our nation's children and youth becomes both a moral imperative and essential to upholding our democracy.

When the federal government tried to deport children in the middle of the night without due process, we took action and prevailed, protecting those children and helping to uphold the rule of law. When civil rights enforcement in schools was weakened, we mobilized to defend students and safeguard their access to a public education free from discrimination. A democracy cannot endure when children are routinely excluded from school and unable to learn, with no recourse to protect their rights.

When families were illegally forced to pay fees or fines for their children's involuntary ensnarement in the justice system, we held counties accountable and returned money to those who had been charged fees unjustly. At a time when rights and safeguards are being weakened, advocating in partnership with children, youth, families and communities is essential to a healthy democracy, and to a future where young people can learn, thrive, and be heard.

For more than 50 years, NCYL has stood alongside children, youth and families who are pushed to the margins and insisted that governments respect their rights and treat them with the dignity they deserve. In 2025, that mission mattered more than ever.

We defended longstanding protections for immigrant children. We expanded access to justice for students. We supported youth leadership and advocacy grounded in lived experience. And we did so with urgency and resolve.

The challenges ahead are serious. So is our commitment.

Thank you for standing with us and for believing that every child and youth deserves the full protection of the law.



**Shakti Belway**  
Executive Director



# ABOUT NCYL

The National Center for Youth Law is a national nonprofit that defends the rights and well-being of children and youth.

For more than fifty years, we have advanced those rights through litigation, policy advocacy, and legal strategy, informed by the experiences of young people and families directly affected by our work.

# NCYL works to ensure that children's rights are respected.

01

## **WE PARTNER WITH YOUTH AND FAMILIES.**

We share power with young people and caregivers, grounding our advocacy in lived experience and ensuring that solutions reflect real conditions on the ground.

02

## **WE HOLD GOVERNMENTS ACCOUNTABLE.**

Through litigation, policy advocacy, and public engagement, we work to ensure that federal, state, and local officials meet their obligations to children. When laws are violated, we act. When rights are threatened, we defend them.

03

## **WE BUILD KNOWLEDGE AND CAPACITY.**

We provide training, technical assistance, and research to youth, advocates, educators, health providers, administrators, and policymakers, so that children's rights are understood and upheld nationwide.

04

## **WE DEFEND CHILDREN.**

When harm is imminent, we move quickly. Emergency litigation and direct advocacy are core to our work.

# 2025: THE YEAR IN ACTION

Across issue areas like child welfare, commercial sexual exploitation, education, health, immigration, and youth justice, NCYL works alongside young people and families to defend the rights of children and youth and hold systems accountable. The shaded-in portion of the map shows the areas we've worked in, and the stories below highlight a snapshot of our work in 2025.



## Defending Students' Civil Rights

### NATIONAL

When the U.S. Department of Education's Office for Civil Rights was effectively dismantled in early 2025, millions of students were left unprotected federally from discrimination, harassment, and assault.

NCYL filed suit on behalf of families whose complaints had been acknowledged as valid by OCR and then abandoned abruptly, without resolution. NCYL's case challenges the federal government's failure to fulfill its statutory duty to investigate civil rights violations in schools.

The litigation continues, with national implications for students' safety and access to equal educational opportunities.

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## Emergency Protection for Immigrant Children

### NATIONAL

In late summer, the federal government moved to unlawfully remove hundreds of unaccompanied Guatemalan children without due process. Many of these children were Indigenous, some were very young, and others had lost one or both parents.

Children were woken during the night, removed from detention centers, and transported to airports across South Texas as deportations were set to proceed, all in violation of their rights.

NCYL worked intensely in the middle of the night to uphold the rights of these children and protect them from being forcibly and unlawfully removed. Within hours, a federal judge issued an emergency order halting the flights, grounding the aircraft before any children were removed.

NCYL is now co-counsel on the case, *LGML v. Noem*, and successfully obtained a preliminary injunction protecting all unaccompanied Guatemalan children in federal custody from unlawful removal while the case is litigated.



CHIARA EISNER | AUGUST 31, 2025

**Hundreds of unaccompanied Guatemalan children can stay in the U.S. for now, judge says**

# Addressing a Shifting Federal Landscape

## NATIONAL

Amid a rapidly shifting federal policy landscape in 2025, NCYL produced several timely and accessible resources to support children and families nationwide as proposed budget and legislative changes threatened their health, stability and access to essential resources. NCYL produced separate Federal Advocacy Toolkits, which are available in both English and Spanish, for youth and for parents/caregivers, offering accessible guidance on advocating for changes in laws and funding. Also, in 2025, NCYL published “A Timeline of the Impact of H.R. 1 on the Health and Well-being of Children and Families” in direct response to the government’s proposed slashing of critical supports like food assistance, healthcare access, and other essential safety-net programs. This vital resource translates complex federal developments into clear, actionable understanding for advocates, partners, and communities.

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## Ending Illegal Juvenile Court Fees

### ILLINOIS

SB 1519 passed both houses of the Illinois General Assembly, stopping schools from using municipal tickets as a form of discipline and requiring public reporting on law enforcement referrals. NCYL drove this change through advocacy and work with coalition partners, lifting up clear evidence that ticketing at school was unfair and didn’t help students learn or improve behavior. The new law ended a practice that had sent students to municipal court for school-based incidents and would often saddle families with large monetary fines and force children to miss class time. This victory strengthened protections for Illinois’s 1.8 million public school students statewide.

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## Access to a Full School Day

### OREGON

Students with disabilities across Oregon are routinely sent home early, separated from peers, and denied equal educational opportunity.

NCYL’s class action lawsuit, reinstated by the Ninth Circuit in 2025, affirms that students with disabilities are entitled to meaningful access to education and to be heard in court when that access is denied.





# 2025 IMPACT: BY THE NUMBERS

This section offers a snapshot of NCYL's 2025 impact across issue areas. These figures reflect real changes in children's lives: protecting rights, removing barriers, and strengthening the systems children and families rely on every day.

# Centering Child and Family Dignity in the Foster System and Combating Commercial Sexual Exploitation

# 23,000

children impacted through NCYL settlement monitoring

# 125+

providers engaged in Los Angeles County CSEC pathway (created by NCYL)

## Other Key Takeaways

First-of-its-kind simulation training launched by NCYL

## Protecting Students' Rights and Public Schools

# 42,000

students benefited from NCYL settlement enforcement requiring inclusive schools

# 100+

organizations convened through Education Civil Rights Alliance

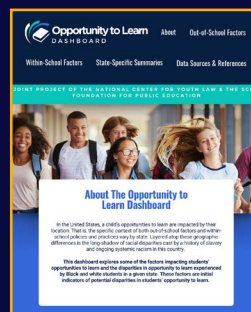
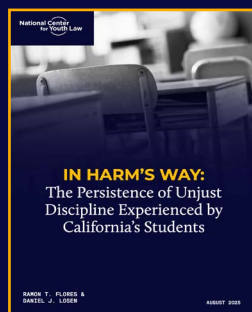
## Other Key Takeaways

NCYL-created Opportunity to Learn Dashboard covered **16 states** of data

**3** national convenings hosted by NCYL

# 3

major national resources published by NCYL



**AB 1230** enacted in California with NCYL support, removing money and transportation barriers that kept expelled students from returning to school

# Enforcing Children's Rights in the Immigration System

**6,600+**

advocates, providers, and policymakers trained by NCYL to help children and families

**90**

children and families held in federal detention interviewed by NCYL

## Other Key Takeaways

**11** federal immigration facilities detaining children monitored by NCYL

NCYL team members quoted or featured in **63 news articles and radio pieces**, shaping the narrative to lift youth and family rights

# Reforming the Youth Justice System

**\$10M**

secured with NCYL support for trauma-informed services for youth in Colorado

**346**

youth trained by NCYL to advocate, organize, and participate in policy change

## Other Key Takeaways

**41** trainings delivered by NCYL to community-based organizations to advance health-informed justice reform, strengthening advocacy, implementation, and impact evaluation.

**1.8M**

public school students are now protected after successful passage of an Illinois bill, with NCYL support, prohibiting municipal fines in schools.

**6,000**

youth each year will be freed from endless probation under AB 1376 (2025), a landmark California reform led by NCYL and youth advocacy partners

Across **11** NCYL sites, strengthened community-based resources and supports by providing sustained technical assistance and resource mobilization to **36** organizations.

# Safeguarding Youth Health and Well-Being

10,000

views of content from *A Flourishing Start*, our podcast on early childhood mental health and well-being

170

youth, parents, and caregivers engaged by NCYL in shaping policies, campaigns, resources, and programs

2,000+

advocates, healthcare professionals, legislators, and others across the country trained or offered technical assistance to improve equitable practices and healthcare access for youth and families

25

current and former foster youth participated in NCYL's Youth Advisory Board and were trained in policy advocacy

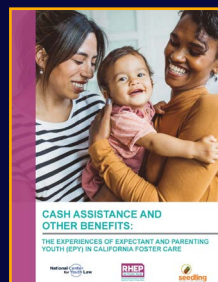
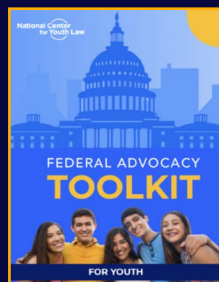
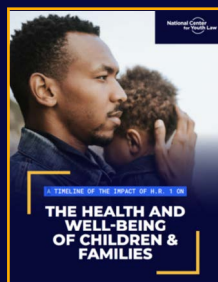
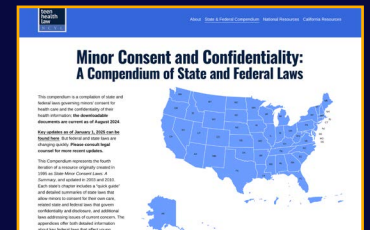
## Other Key Takeaways

22 bills introduced in Hawai'i with NCYL support

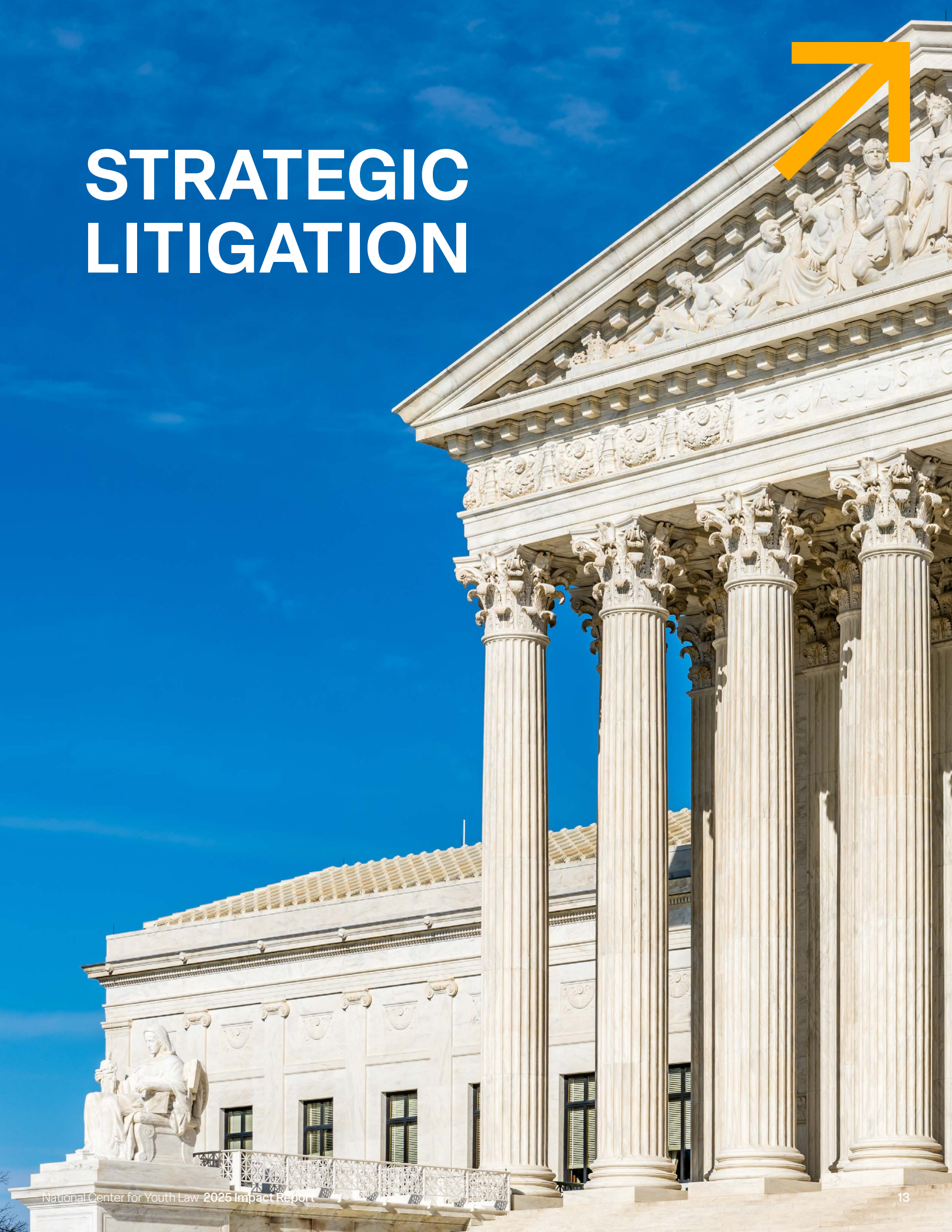
50-state compendium of laws impacting adolescent access to healthcare released by NCYL

4

major national resources published by NCYL



# STRATEGIC LITIGATION



## Protecting Family Reunification for Unaccompanied Children

In May 2025, the National Center for Youth Law and co-counsel filed *Angelica S. v. HHS*, which challenges new U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) and Office of Refugee Resettlement (ORR) policies that have resulted in the separation of families and the prolonged detention of unaccompanied children in federal immigration custody.

In June, the court granted a preliminary injunction barring ORR from enforcing the new requirements in adjudicating class members' sponsor applications, **helping clear a path for children's reunification with caregivers** while the case continues.

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## Defending the *Flores* Settlement Agreement

For nearly three decades, *Flores* has required the federal government to meet the basic needs of children in immigration custody. In 2025, the federal government again sought to terminate it.

NCYL opposed the government's motion, filing stark and recent evidence of the government's ongoing failure to meet the *Flores* Settlement's basic legal requirements. A federal judge rejected the government's motion, **preserving the only enforceable protections for children in federal immigration custody**. NCYL is continuing to advocate so that all children in federal immigration custody are treated with humanity and dignity.

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## *Carter v. U.S. Department of Education*

This case challenges the federal government's abandonment of civil rights enforcement in schools. It represents students whose complaints of discrimination were left unresolved. The litigation continues and has already brought **national attention to the consequences of inaction**.

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## *E.L. v. Claps*

For decades, Adams County has prohibited children from visiting in person with their parents who are held in pretrial detention. Instead, families can only visit through expensive video and phone calls and have spent at least \$4.8 million on these calls since 2020.

NCYL filed suit to **defend a child's right to hug their parents** and to family association under the Colorado Constitution.

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## Foster Care Settlement Monitoring

### WASHINGTON | MISSOURI | KANSAS

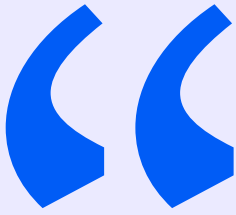
NCYL ensures that nearly **23,000 children in the foster system** benefit from settlements that provide access to necessary health care and safeguards.



# YOUTH VOICES

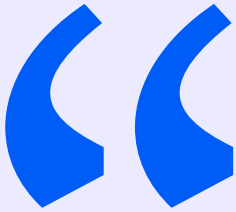
Young people remain central to NCYL’s work. Through advisory boards, advocacy training, and leadership development, youth shape priorities and strategy across issue areas.

Their insight strengthens our work and ensures accountability to those most affected.



It is so important to include youth voices, especially when you're doing work involving reproductive and sexual health equity...because when you leave people out of the conversation you're also leaving people out of the solutions. It also encourages young people to be active participants in their care versus just being passive recipients of care.

ALICIA, ON THEIR TIME AS A MEMBER OF  
NCYL'S REPRODUCTIVE HEALTH EQUITY PROJECT  
(RHEP) YOUTH ADVISORY BOARD



“[The RHEP Youth Advisory Board] has given me the opportunity to become a leader, to showcase my talents, my creativity and my story...One of the most meaningful moments for me that stands out is being a part of the podcast and helping to bring it to life. I believe showcasing and sharing our stories is one of the most important things you could do. Being able to relate to one another and to know that we’re all human and that we share that humanity with each other, I believe is what creates the change.... Not many people do work like this where they uplift the voices of the young adults that are system impacted and have lived experience and things like that, and I feel like this is a one-of-a-kind opportunity.”

DANIEL, ON THEIR TIME AS A MEMBER OF  
NCYL’S REPRODUCTIVE HEALTH EQUITY PROJECT  
(RHEP) YOUTH ADVISORY BOARD



# LOOKING AHEAD

The years ahead will test how effectively the law protects children and youth when rights are weakened, institutions retreat, or safeguards fail. In 2026, the National Center for Youth Law will focus on mitigating harm while defending and reestablishing foundational rights. This work will be shaped by young people themselves and grounded in strategies that reduce immediate harm while strengthening long-term protections.

Across all areas, NCYL will remain focused on reducing harm, strengthening accountability, and ensuring young people have both the protections and the power to shape their futures.



# JOIN US!

Children and **youth need advocates** willing to act with urgency and clarity.

**Partner** with us. **Invest** in this work. **Stay** connected.

*Every right defended. Every voice heard.*

[YOUTHLAW.ORG](https://www.youthlaw.org)