

NCJFCJ YOUTH MENTAL HEALTH POLICY STATEMENT

The National Council of Juvenile and Family Court Judges (NCJFCJ) recognizes that mental health plays a critical factor in the lives of children, youth, and families. Sappenfeld et al. (2024) found that mental health concerns have doubled since 2016, and that 1 in 5 children currently have a behavioral or mental health diagnosis (Center for Disease Control, 2025). Youth involved in the child welfare and juvenile justice systems experience higher rates of mental health disorders compared to those without system involvement and often times are not receiving services, due to limited availability (American Academy of Pediatrics, 2021; Murie et al., 2025). Unaddressed or even undiagnosed mental health concerns can contribute to child welfare and juvenile justice system involvement and may disrupt placements, success in school and overall well-being (Bunger et al., 2021; Engler et al., 2022).

Nationally, courts face increasing challenges in addressing the mental health needs of system-involved youth and families. While the court's responsibility is not to diagnose or treat mental health concerns, it is crucial for the court to be aware of how mental health intersects with child welfare, and juvenile justice-system involvement. Communities across the nation have limited access to mental health resources and are challenged to only use what is available; therefore, *courts are uniquely positioned to play an integral leadership role in identifying, responding to, appropriately aligning services where available, and supporting the mental health needs of all parties appearing before them.*

Thus, the NCJFCJ makes the following recommendations:

- Judges should receive ongoing training that addresses best practices regarding how trauma and mental health can impact behavior both inside and outside the courtroom.
- Judges and court professionals should work collaboratively with child welfare agencies, behavioral health providers, and schools to be aware of the assessments needed and types of resources available that address the continuity of care.
- Judges and court professionals should encourage youth and family engagement in case and treatment planning as an essential element to healing and long-term stability. In cases involving indigenous families, judges and court professionals should take into consideration the importance of cultural connections, tribal healing ceremonies, and/or reconnection to family, kin, and tribes.
- Judges and court professionals must lead and sustain community partnerships to identify resource gaps, conduct community resource mapping, and develop solution areas where services are scarce.
- Judges and court professionals should engage individuals with lived experience in shaping court practices, policies, and responses to mental health challenges.