

Children's Rights

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<https://www.childrensrights.org/lessons-on-reimagining-state-systems/>

Public Facing Advocacy Writing

By Kristina Chenault, Digital Marketing & Communications Manager

I had the opportunity to join my colleagues at this years National Association of Counsel for Childrens (NACC) conference, *From Crisis to Innovation: Toward a Family-Centered Justice System*, in Denver, Colorado on August 13. Traveling to Denver during the pandemic was a new experience. But being surrounded by experts in the child welfare, juvenile justice, and criminal legal systems was powerful with some rightfully uncomfortable and honest conversations. The event brought together people who are passionate about changing systems to engage in conversations about how we can reimagine and redefine the ways we advocate for children and families. The conference included the active participation of two members of the Childrens Rights leadership team: Samantha Bartosz, deputy director of litigation strategy, in the first plenary session, and Shereen A. White, director of advocacy and policy, in the final plenary session.

In the kickoff plenary, led by John Kelly, senior editor of The Imprint News, Samantha joined Vanessa Dorantes, Commissioner of the State of Connecticut Department of Children and Families, and [Jordan Thompson](#), Racial Justice Organizer at ACLU of New Hampshire. In light of a long-overdue national reckoning on racial injustice, the ongoing dangers of COVID-19, new federal legislation, and continued reports of shocking conditions demanding action, there is increased urgency to end the unnecessary institutionalization of children in our child welfare systems.

Almost a quarter of young people experience an institution as their first placement in foster care 42% of them are Black youth. And thousands of children are sent out of state instead of receiving community support while living with their family or kin. The panel discussion highlighted the numerous harms, economic costs, and legal rights violated by the unnecessary use of congregate care and dove into the experiences of living in institutions along with practical solutions for change. These solutions are reflected in the recommendations found in Childrens Rights 2021 publication [Families over Facilities](#) the tenets of which have been endorsed by Vanessa Dorantes, the NACC and over twenty national child welfare advocacy organizations and thought leaders.

The panelists discussed the ways systems define families through the lens of crisis, needlessly separating children from their parents and into facilities, frequently resulting in lasting trauma. State policies, structures, and procedures fail to consider the voices of impacted youth. The speakers challenged attendees to be fierce and deliberate in calling for an end to institutionalization through reforms that are focused on family preservation and centered on the voices of impacted youth.

Samantha Bartosz, Deputy Litigation Director

In the [closing plenary](#), Shereen joined James Bell, Founding President of the W. Haywood Burns Institute, Maleeka Jihad, Director of the MJ Consulting Firm, Jasmine Snell, with the Chattanooga Regional Homeless Coalition, and Kendra Van de Water, Co-Founder of Youth Empowerment for Advancement Hangout. This critical conversation went beyond discussing disparity and disproportionality in child-serving systems to confront the history of white supremacy and the racist structures that pervade them.

Shereen spoke to the critical need to use appropriate [language](#) as a way to both acknowledge the history of these systems and frame the work being done on behalf of children and families. She also emphasized the importance of unlearning a defensive approach to privilege and understanding how to leverage that privilege to strengthen communities.

Panelists discussed how to identify and dismantle racist structures and reimagine the progress that can be made by actively engaging in anti-racist child advocacy and recognizing the ways in which we uphold white supremacy in child-serving systems.

Shereen A. White, Director of Advocacy & Policy

These conversations are critical to continue in our own organizations and with our partners for system transformation. As James Bell said, There are no accidental policies. We must examine the ways in which we traumatize families and children. We must center those with lived experiences and examine the practices and policies that harm them. And we must lift our collective voices to be bold in dismantling white supremacy and harmful, racist, and discriminatory policies. Everyone has a role to play to create a more just, equitable, anti-racist society. A society where children and families are not only heard but where communities are strengthened, and people can thrive.

Our sincerest thank you to NACC for this opportunity to engage in the most pressing dialogues for our child welfare and juvenile justice systems. We look forward to partnering with other advocates and utilizing our expertise in child-focused strategic civil rights litigation and advocacy as we continue to protect the rights of our nations children.

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First Name

Last Name

Email Address

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