

## WHAT ABOUT THE KIDS?

Children deserve to be safe and cared for in loving families with the support of strong communities. But every day, America's child welfare, juvenile justice, education, immigration, and healthcare systems deny children their rights, exposing them to toxic trauma, discrimination, abuse, and neglect.

Children's Rights, through a uniquely effective blend of advocacy and litigation, holds government systems accountable for protecting kids and keeping families together. Supported by a network of child and family advocates, we are building a movement to end our nation's indifference to children's human and civil rights. Together, we can reimagine a future that recognizes the humanity and dignity of all children and families.

In 2023, through civil rights impact litigation, advocacy and policy initiatives, and public education, Children's Rights addressed persistent and emerging harms in government systems that directly impact children and parents, and drive families apart. Our work spanned efforts at the state, national, and international levels.

Throughout the year we fought for a community-based response to the nation's mental health crisis on behalf of children and families of color, and those living in poverty. We used every tool at our

disposal to end the brutal practice of warehousing youth in unsafe institutions that violate their rights and deny them an education, health care, and other vital services. We made significant inroads in building a national campaign to stop foster systems, abetted by discriminatory federal laws and incentives, from unjustly separating children from their parents. And we continued to call for an end to the mistreatment of immigrant children held illegally in federal custody, and those placed in state foster systems that deny them their legal rights.

## ADDRESSING THE CHILD MENTAL HEALTH CRISIS

**The nation's mental health crisis is impacting more children than ever before. Children's Rights is calling for a response rooted in equity and community.**

We work to ensure that children with mental and behavioral health conditions get the developmentally appropriate and timely treatments and services they need when and where they need them, without being criminalized or segregated from their loved ones and communities.

We filed a lawsuit in Maryland, where for over a decade the State has failed to exercise adequate oversight while administering powerful psychotropic medications to children in the foster system, often to sedate them and suppress their ability to move or think.

We reached a groundbreaking interim settlement agreement with Iowa requiring the state to establish an array of intensive home and community-based mental health services capable of supporting the mental health needs of the State's Medicaid-eligible children.



**No child should live in a chemical straightjacket.  
No child should be unnecessarily drugged.**

Katie Simon, Staff Attorney

## ENDING THE INSTITUTIONALIZATION OF YOUTH

**Every year thousands of young people are locked in prison-like institutions where they are abused, neglected, and denied vital services. Children's Rights is calling for an end to this brutal practice.**

Following a [USA Today investigation](#) that revealed horrifying abuses, we filed a civil rights case against North Carolina for its pervasive, system-wide practice of unnecessarily institutionalizing children with mental and behavioral health needs in dangerous psychiatric institutions – sometimes sending them out of state, hundreds of miles away from their families and communities.

We are actively advocating in many jurisdictions to dismantle systems that lock kids up instead of keeping them safe and providing them with the services they need. In New York, we are building a youth-led coalition of lived experts and advocates to call on state legislators to stop institutionalizing kids and instead strengthen access to community services and supports that prioritize families and communities.



**We must stop ripping families apart and placing kids into a system where they are hurt, not loved.**

Kaylah McMillan, Youth Advocate

### Key 2023 Updates



#### IOWA

We are making [progress](#) in settling a case, similar to one filed in New York, to ensure that children get the community-based mental health care services they need.

#### MARYLAND

Our [class action](#) here is the third such case we have brought to ensure effective oversight in administering powerful drugs to children in foster systems.

#### NEW YORK

We published [Are You Listening?](#), the brave accounts of young New Yorkers calling on the state to stop putting kids in congregate facilities.

#### NORTH CAROLINA

We sued to [end the warehousing](#) of more than 500 children with disabilities in dangerous psychiatric facilities rather than providing them with community-based services.

## FIGHTING FOR FAMILY INTEGRITY

**The relationships of thousands of children and parents are unnecessarily severed each year. Once in government custody, children pay a heavy price. We are growing a movement to stop the unjust and devastating separation of children from their families.**

Family separation is an urgent human rights issue. Children's Rights is powerfully exposing how systems violate the human rights of families by unnecessarily separating them and forcibly placing children in government custody, where they face a great risk of harm. We are working to eliminate or amend U.S. laws rooted in racism that result in the removal of Black, Native, and impoverished families.

Along with fellow advocates, we secured the support of the UN Committee on Human Rights in calling on the U.S. to uphold its commitment to family integrity and adopt measures to reduce unnecessary, poverty-related child removals that harm children and destroy families.



**We cannot accept a system that is rooted in hate and oppresses the clients that we serve.**

*Shereen A. White, Director of Advocacy and Policy*

## PROTECTING THE RIGHTS OF IMMIGRANT YOUTH

**Children's Rights is combatting the mistreatment of immigrant children held in federal detention and state foster systems where their rights are blatantly being denied.**

Children's Rights is one of only three organizations in the country allowed to speak directly with immigrant children detained in federal facilities. Our advocacy has led to the closure of multiple federal emergency intake sites like the infamous Ft. Bliss tent city where thousands of traumatized Central American children were crammed into dirty, dangerous facilities. We are also defending abandoned and mistreated immigrant children under family court protection who are denied their legal rights once placed in foster systems, and are put at grave risk of detention or deportation.

We filed and reached a preliminary settlement in a groundbreaking lawsuit in Tennessee seeking to codify the foster system's role in helping children navigate the immigration process. In partnership with state immigration advocates, we uncovered systemic failures to identify immigrant children in government custody and provide them with assistance in obtaining critical immigration status protections created by Congress.



**We call on this country to care for children in government custody with the same dignity, respect and humanity that we'd afford our own children.**

*Leecia Welch, Deputy Litigation Director*

## Key 2023 Updates



### CALIFORNIA

We're representing young adults aging out of the foster system who are taking a bold stand to disrupt the pipeline that funnels thousands of older youth each year from the **Los Angeles** foster system to homelessness.

### TENNESSEE

We filed a **groundbreaking lawsuit** to compel the state to fulfill its legal obligations to immigrant children in the foster system eligible for status relief so that they no longer live in fear of deportation and separation from their families and communities.

### NATIONAL

Through **federal and state hearings and national education campaigns**, we advocated against family reporting mandates that overburden systems and hurt kids.

With a coalition of advocates, we helped shape new **U.S. rules** that give kin foster parents equitable support to care for children when that is in their best interests.

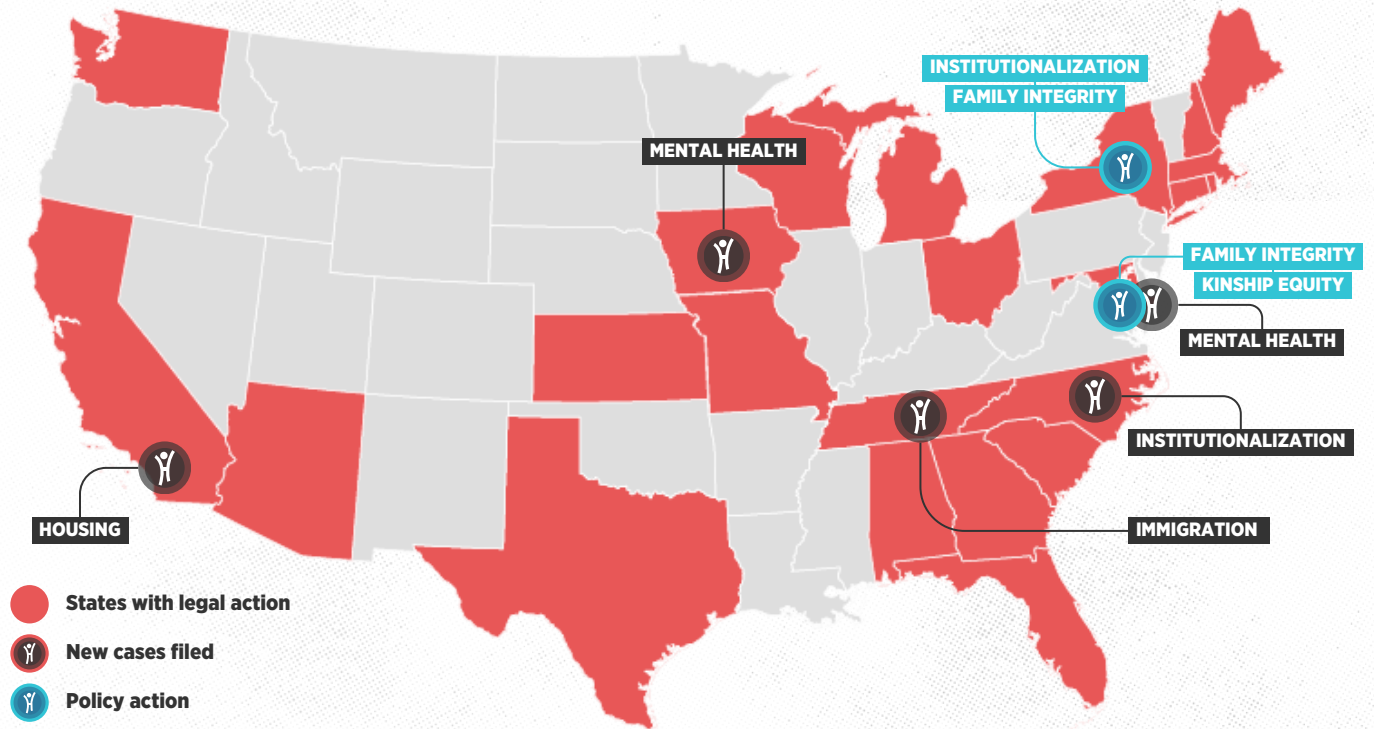
### INTERNATIONAL

Our **report** and testimony prompted the UN Human Rights Committee to call on the U.S. to dismantle racist, discriminatory laws.



# BRINGING NATIONAL ATTENTION TO FAMILY JUSTICE AND CHILDREN'S RIGHTS, AND HOLDING GOVERNMENT SYSTEMS ACCOUNTABLE.

## TAKE A LOOK AT WHERE WE ARE MAKING AN IMPACT FOR KIDS



**302K**

kids currently represented through our legal actions nationwide

**95K**

young people's mental health rights protected

**4.8K**

youth aging out of the foster system represented to ensure they have housing and vital services

**4,000+**

attended our trainings on anti-racist strategies and listening sessions on solutions for protecting the rights of children and families

**50+**

bills and policies supported for better outcomes for children and families

**16**

peer-reviewed and academic publications cited our research and policy recommendations

[childrensrights.org/WhatAboutTheKids](https://childrensrights.org/WhatAboutTheKids)

## WANT TO LEARN MORE?

Watch our short video, **What About the Kids**, to learn how we're growing a movement to stand against injustice and reimagine better futures for children for generations to come.