

DISABILITY RIGHTS NEW JERSEY

Disability Rights New Jersey's Youth Justice Project

Program: Disrupting the School-to-Prison Pipeline in Passaic County

ADVANCING JUSTICE. ADVOCATING FOR INCLUSION.

Who we are

Established in 2020, the Youth Justice Project's mission is to "decriminalize disability" for youth with disabilities in underserved communities by ensuring their educational and community needs are met through legal representation, community advocacy, and self-advocacy training. Its goals are to lessen educational disparities, reduce recidivism, and empower youth with disabilities.

The program we are proposing

The Youth Justice Project is the only program in New Jersey dedicated to educational and community behavioral and mental health services advocacy for justice-impacted and at-risk youth with disabilities. We advocate for appropriate services, whether the youth is at home, in a residential program or in detention.

Through a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) with the New Jersey Judiciary, the Youth Justice Project currently operates in Essex and Mercer counties. A staff attorney is embedded within the juvenile court system in each county. Youth are referred to the program by court stakeholders (judges, public defenders, probation officers, etc.). The Youth Justice Project also assists youth with disabilities facing school disciplinary actions that result in them being excluded from school or improperly placed in alternative schools; both scenarios can lead to youth disengaging from school and becoming entangled in the juvenile justice system.

The Impact100 Garden State grant (Impact100 grant) will allow the Youth Justice Project to expand its reach and influence. Youth Justice Project attorneys will provide legal services to justice-impacted and at-risk youth with disabilities in Passaic County, so they have access to appropriate educational and community services, critical components impacting the trajectory of their lives.

What makes this a high-impact program

Education is recognized as a crucial factor in reducing recidivism rates and improving long-term outcomes for justice-impacted youth from underserved areas. The Youth Justice Project is a high-impact program because it focuses on keeping at-risk youth with disabilities engaged in school and ensuring they receive appropriate educational supports and services. The expected positive impact will include reduced educational disparities and recidivism rates for at-risk youth with disabilities.

Expansion into Passaic County will bring legal services to an area where statistics show there is a need for additional interventions that address the specific needs of at-risk youth. The Youth Justice Project's presence in Passaic County will bolster its efforts to make systemic reforms within the youth justice system. By ensuring more equitable access to resources and supports for a greater number of at-risk youths with disabilities, the Youth Justice Project will continue to be a nation-wide model for youth justice initiatives.

How we will make it happen

With the Impact100 grant funds, the Youth Justice Project will be able to bring its already proven model of success to Passaic County. Early intervention and strong advocacy lead to better outcomes for youth with disabilities who are already involved or at serious risk of becoming involved with the juvenile justice system. The Impact100 grant funds will extend the reach and breadth of legal services the Youth Justice Project provides to a greater number of at-risk youths. In the first year, we expect to provide individual legal representation to at least twenty youth as well as offer training and guidance to countless court and community stakeholders. By educating a broader range of resources about the intersection of education and disabilities, we will create more safeguards and supports for at-risk youth with disabilities in Passaic County. This is how we break cycles and build futures.

How we will measure success

Success will be measured by (1) the number of justice-impacted youth clients in Passaic County who obtain necessary educational and community-based support services that meet their unique needs, and (2) the number of youths with disabilities excluded from school who return to an appropriate educational placement.