



30 YEARS OF

TENACITY

Part of our 30th Anniversary Spotlight Series

We don't give up.

The issues facing DC children and families are complex and require multiple approaches. If one strategy doesn't work, we try another. Whether we are advocating on behalf of one child or solving a problem affecting thousands, our persistence gets results.

Inside, you'll meet children we've helped to overcome daunting obstacles, explore the systemic victories we've achieved along the way and learn how we're pressing forward to build a brighter future for every DC child.



As we celebrate our 30th anniversary, we're shining a spotlight on three pillars that have powered our work for decades – tenacity, innovation and impact. They fuel our commitment to building a strong foundation of family, health and education for every DC child – and position us to meet the challenges ahead.

Transforming DC's Behavioral Health System

Over the past 30 years, Children's Law Center has reached more than 60,000 children and families directly – and hundreds of thousands more through our systemic advocacy. We've seen how poverty, trauma and racism can impact a child's behavioral health.

This is why we are committed to fixing one of DC's most persistent challenges by ensuring every child can access quality behavioral health care.

When we began this effort, thousands of children were struggling – waiting months for evaluations, at a loss for how to navigate confusing systems or unable to find a therapist who accepted their insurance. We met children like Davon who had been diagnosed with bipolar disorder and struggled academically. It wasn't until his Children's Law Center lawyer stepped in that his school provided the right support. His grades jumped a full letter just a few months later.

For every Davon, thousands more children were falling through the cracks.

So we added systemic advocacy in addition to our direct representation, pushing for widespread changes while continuing to fix children's urgent needs.

While we work to fix the system, our lawyers, social workers and medical partners step in to get children the support they need. Their victories reinforce what we've always known: with the right support at the right time, a child's future changes.

OUR TENACITY LEADS TO REFORMS

Progress is never linear, and new barriers continue to arise, but our commitment will not waver. Our work to reform DC's behavioral health system began in 1996 and continues today:

“Mental health resources affect a child's entire future. Children can't thrive if we don't give them the right tools.”
– Davon's mom, Ms. Priester



We take what we learn from our individual cases and use it to fuel systemic reforms. Editorials like this one in 2012 created momentum for change.

1996	2010	2012	2013	2014
Advocated from the start for behavioral health services for children in foster care and with special education needs.	Strengthened our holistic representation by adding social workers to our legal team.	Released a comprehensive plan to turn our current inadequate system into a truly functioning children's behavioral health system. The plan, subsequent annual report cards and widespread media coverage garnered attention and sparked changes.	Led a multi-disciplinary effort that resulted in all pediatricians being required to use a standardized screening tool to evaluate for behavioral health needs during routine wellness visits.	Advocated for requiring managed care organizations to report on mental health service provision, leading to 5,000 more children accessing services.

Tenacious Advocates for Teens

At 16, Princess entered foster care, having experienced neglect and abuse for most of her childhood. During the time she was in care – until she aged out at 21 years old – she struggled to find a place where she belonged.

Each new home brought new expectations and new uncertainties. Throughout that time, her Children’s Law Center attorney, Megan Conway, remained a steady source of support. When Princess felt overlooked or unheard, Megan was there. When Princess needed to generate income during the pandemic, Megan worked with her to create budgets and connected her with someone who helped her create a business plan. When there was turnover with Princess’s government social workers, Megan made sure important appointments didn’t fall through the cracks. And, as Princess approached the end of care, Megan made sure she had stable housing.

Adolescence is already a complex time in a child’s life. Older youth who enter foster care experience significant instability and can exhibit difficult behaviors, but we never give up on them. We are constantly finding creative ways to address each new issue that comes their way while also helping them safely transition into adulthood.

Today, Princess is working to reshape the very system she once navigated.

Over the past two years, she has worked with current and former foster youth, Children’s Law Center and government leaders to draft and pass a new law that would help older youth create their “SOUL family,” a groundbreaking way for young people to define the family that will support them as they become more independent.

“ *I’ve been able to celebrate Princess’s graduation from high school, her graduation from beauty school, and now I get to watch her become a passionate advocate for youth in foster care.”*

– Megan Conway, Senior Attorney, Children’s Law Center



Princess speaks with fellow SOUL advocacy leader, Dayar, before meeting with DC Councilmembers at the Wilson Building.

Children’s Law Center represents nearly half of all DC youth in foster care – more than 3,500 children over the past three decades.

2015

Addressed child psychiatrist shortage by creating a new on-call network allowing pediatricians to treat low-level behavioral health needs and connect patients to other services.

2016

Played integral role in developing and implementing a new public health model to ensure school-based behavioral health programs in every school.

2020

Because of our advocacy, DC children maintained access to therapists via remote visits during the pandemic.

2021

Published *A Path Forward*: a blueprint to guide the next round of improvements to DC’s behavioral health system.

2025

Local and federal budget cuts resulted in new barriers to implementing changes to DC behavioral health system.



Taking on Recurring Policy Battles

Imagine raising two young children on just \$800 a month. With DC's high cost of living, it's nearly impossible.



“ If [my children] have to sleep on the floor in the hallway of some apartment building, what are they going to do in school?”

– DC mom

Yet every day, parents who live on a meager income try to stretch every dollar to provide a better future for their children.

TANF – the only cash assistance program for DC families – is a lifeline for parents struggling to pay rent, their utility bills or even just purchase diapers. That small amount of money can make a huge difference in creating stability for their child.

In 2016, local government leaders sought to cut TANF. We led a coalition to fight these changes – and won.

Ten years later, DC leaders are once again trying to balance the DC budget by cutting this essential program – pushing 15,000+ children deeper into poverty.

Some families will see their support drop from \$800 to only \$200 per month. And given significant federal cuts to other important services and an already fragile economy, the harm will be exponentially worse.

DC children will always need tenacious advocates. We're doing everything we can to protect TANF and are also fighting to ensure children have the support they need – because we know when we invest in our children, we are investing in a stronger community.

In a city where policies and practices can change quickly, progress requires persistence. During times of crisis, it is our tenacity combined with the support of our community which keeps us going. The children and families we work with, our medical and pro bono partners, donors and supporters – these are the relationships that turn ideas into action and action into results.

Interested in helping DC children? Visit childrenslawcenter.org/tenacity or scan here to learn more about our work and ways you can get involved.

