

FROM THE CHIEF

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CHILDREN SHOULD BE SEEN — AND HEARD

Elevating Young Voices in West Virginia's Courts

The adage that wisdom often comes from the mouths of babes dates back to biblical times. Yet we sometimes overlook children's voices in modern systems designed to protect and guide young people. Children are not passive participants in their own lives. They are individuals with thoughts, fears, hopes and insights — all too often shaped by experiences many adults would struggle to endure.

As judicial officers and lawyers, our highest calling is to safeguard the Rule of Law and to ensure access to justice — especially for our most vulnerable, the children who enter West Virginia's child welfare and juvenile justice systems. And if we are truly committed to justice, then we must be equally committed to hearing their voices.

Across our state, the statistics are sobering. More than 6,000 children are currently in foster care — more

than the number of active attorneys in West Virginia. In 2024 alone, 5,472 child abuse and neglect cases were filed, accounting for nearly 14% of all circuit court filings. As we are all too well aware, that represents a significant increase from just a decade ago.

Each of those thousands of cases represents at least one child.

A child sitting in a courtroom, unsure of what the legal terms mean.

A child waiting anxiously to learn whether she will return home, move to a relative's care or be placed in a foster home.

A child at the mercy of a system that can feel formal, intimidating and overwhelming — even for adults.

For seasoned lawyers and judges, court procedures are familiar terrain. For a 10-year-old, a courtroom can feel like a foreign country.

Too often, our systems focus on services, programs and outcomes,

without pausing to ask the most important question: *What is this experience like for the child?* What does he understand? What does she fear? What does he need to feel safe, respected and heard? What information can that child provide to help find the best outcomes?

This year, our Court is taking deliberate steps to answer those questions.

We are launching the "Hear Our Voices" initiative in partnership with the National Center for State Courts — an 18-month effort to elevate the perspectives of young people involved in our child welfare and juvenile justice systems.

This initiative is not about symbolic gestures or spotlighting a handful of success stories. We aspire to ignite a culture change that will amplify children's voices in our justice system.

Through Hear Our Voices, we



Family Treatment Court is just one example of our legal system crossing paths with children. The “Hear Our Voices” initiative, in partnership with the National Center for State Courts, aims to elevate the perspectives of young people involved in our child welfare and juvenile justice systems. ALL PHOTOS BY ALEX WILSON/MULTIMEDIA SPECIALIST-SUPREME COURT OF APPEALS.



will partner with “lived experts” — young people who have personally experienced our child welfare and juvenile justice systems. Their insights will help us identify where court processes are confusing, intimidating or unnecessarily stressful, and where we can improve accessibility, transparency and meaningful participation.

Rather than imagining what a courtroom feels like to a child, we will learn directly from those children who have lived it.

Justice requires more than fair outcomes; we must also undertake efforts to allow each individual involved to feel respected, understood and heard throughout the process. When young people are meaningfully engaged — when they understand what is happening and why — the systems function better. Decision-makers are better informed. Trust in institutions grows. And children are better positioned to move forward with resilience and stability.

While this is no small undertaking given the increasing volume and complexity of these cases, our goal is clear: by January 2027, we aim to increase youth participation in child welfare and juvenile justice hearings, signaling a meaningful shift toward youth-centered court practices across our state.

Our staff is hard at work to achieve that goal, but real change cannot come from the Supreme Court’s Administrative Office alone. If you serve in West Virginia’s child welfare or juvenile justice system, I ask you to link arms with the Court in this effort.

Judicial officers must be willing to champion these efforts within their circuits. Lawyers, guardians ad litem, court staff, probation officers and child welfare professionals must commit to partnership and innovation. And we must all be guided by a shared belief that listening to young people strengthens — rather than complicates — the pursuit of justice.

We are in the early stages of this work. We will move thoughtfully, deliberately and collaboratively to ensure successful statewide participation. But we move forward with urgency as well, because the children who stand before our courts cannot wait for incremental progress.

When children enter our courtrooms, we hope to ensure that they encounter not only authority and procedure, but also respect and understanding.

Let us commit ourselves to building a culture in the court system where West Virginia’s children are not only seen — but truly heard. **WVLC**