



2022  
KidsVoice  
**IMPACT  
REPORT**

"In the wake of the pandemic, children in the foster care system have been left treading water."

Jonathan Budd, Associate Executive Director

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KidsVoice is a registered 501(c)(3) nonprofit organization

# Message from the Executive Director



**Scott Hollander**

I am pleased to share our 2022 Impact Report with you. It is a chance to share stories and data to illustrate how, with your support, our staff positively affects thousands of children in Allegheny County and beyond.

In 2022, KidsVoice's impact was felt at the individual, community, and systemic levels.

In this report, you can read about how KidsVoice helped Justin, a young adult who was adopted from abroad as a teen—and then fell into citizenship limbo (page 8)—and learn about a KidsVoice legal initiative that creates a positive systemic impact for students with special education needs throughout Pittsburgh (page 4).

Our staff has taken an innovative and relentless approach to address the ongoing challenges of the pandemic and shortages of services for our clients. The child welfare system remains understaffed, there are waiting lists for vital mental health resources, and schools struggle with the challenge of addressing pandemic-related learning loss in an equitable way.

I hope that this Impact Report provides a fuller picture of our work and how your support helps to protect children and make a difference in their lives.

# What We Do

**KidsVoice mission statement:** To advocate in court and in the community to ensure a safe and permanent home for abused, neglected, and at-risk children; and to advocate for former clients through age 24 to help them make a successful transition to adulthood by removing roadblocks to employment, health, and housing.



A multidisciplinary team made up of an attorney and a child advocacy specialist (social service professional with a background in social work, mental health, education, or other related field) works closely with the child and advocates in court and other settings to ensure the child's physical, emotional, and developmental needs are being met. The team works closely with CYF, service providers, foster parents, and family members.

A KidsVoice education attorney joins the team to help with specific educational issues or to serve as the child's Educational Decision Maker if the court determines that is necessary. Issues addressed may include enrollment and discipline, special education advocacy, and more.

A member of the KidsVoice Expansion Team joins the team to assist with other issues that arise outside of dependency court. Issues addressed may include record expungement, social security matters, and representation in magisterial cases.



## Cheryl Gorski, Staff Attorney

"They were just starting this new multidisciplinary model of assigning attorneys and child advocacy specialists to each case when I was hired [in 2002]. I have seen KidsVoice really grow. . . . We have an education team now. We have Expansion now [working with older youth]. ... This is better for the kids." [Read more](#)



# 2022 in Numbers

## Core Work

**3457**

Children we represented in 2022 with an open dependency case

**27%**

Percentage of clients who are 3 years old or younger

**67%**

Percentage of clients who are placed with family or non-related kinship caregivers

## Education

**11**

Staff members dedicated to education matters

**410**

Clients for whom we acted as Educational Decision Maker for at least part of 2022

**35%**

Percentage of KidsVoice's school-aged clients with an IEP or 504 plan

## Older Youth

**503**

Older youth whose cases have closed but used our Expansion services in 2022

**924**

Specialized legal matters handled on behalf of Expansion clients

**89**

Children of expansion clients who benefited from two-generation advocacy



## Rebecca Shafer, CAS

"I love working with transition age youth ... Many of the youth I work with have had a really rough upbringing, and they often have no one to help them when a problem arises. We're here to be that help, and it's always so rewarding when they really open up to me about what's really going on and I start to work with the team to address those issues."

[Read more](#)

In December 2022, KidsVoice negotiated an amicable settlement agreement with Pittsburgh Public Schools that will make a positive impact for hundreds of KidsVoice special education clients in the [Pittsburgh Public Schools](#) district—and also for thousands more special education students in the district who are not our clients. As part of the settlement, PPS will provide COVID Compensatory Services (CCS) for every hour our clients—and other PPS students with IEP and 504 plans—did not receive services from March 2020 to June 2022.

# Core Work: Court Hearings

The "[Taking the Mystery Out of Dependency Hearings](#)" social media series was released in May 2022, Foster Care Awareness Month, to educate followers on the types of hearings in which we represent our clients.



**Joanna Johnson,**  
**Lead Support Staff**

"The things that come across my desk really affect me. Some of the cases are complex and we don't just go with the standard solutions. Other places, the kids probably wouldn't get these services. . . . We're just trying to help these kids, and I really appreciate that." [Read more](#)

## SHELTER CARE HEARINGS

Based on allegations that a child is unsafe at home, Allegheny County Children Youth and Families (CYF) may obtain an Emergency Custody Authorization from a judge, remove a child from her parents, and place the child in care, often with a relative. By law, within 72 hours, the case must be heard in Juvenile Court to determine whether it is necessary for that child to remain out of her home, and, if so, whether the child's current placement is appropriate and what immediate services the child may need.

## DISPOSITION HEARINGS

If the child is adjudicated dependent, the next phase is the disposition hearing, which typically happens at the same time as the adjudication hearing. At the disposition hearing, the judge determines whether the child should remain in their current placement, or a more suitable placement should be found. The judge also determines what services are necessary in order to address the needs of the family and child.

## ADJUDICATION HEARINGS

Within 10 days if the child remained in care after the Shelter Care Hearing, or 45 days if the child returned home, this hearing is used to determine whether the child needs ongoing court supervision—which means the court has the authority to determine where the child lives; address the child's medical and school needs; order the family to participate in evaluations or other services provided by CYF; and order other items that are in the child's best interest. If the child is found to need court supervision, he is adjudicated dependent.

## PERMANENCY REVIEW HEARINGS

After the disposition hearing, the court holds regular permanency review hearings to review the case and determine the progress that is being made by the family to address the issues that caused the court to adjudicate the child dependent. These hearings typically occur every three months until the child's case is closed.

# KidsVoice in the Community

KidsVoice staff members reached thousands of youth, business professionals, community members, and more through:

- Classroom visits
- Roundtables
- Advisory boards & taskforces
- Publications
- Youth programs
- Webinars
- Awareness events
- Conferences



**"KidsVoice's Two-Generation Advocacy: Helping Former Foster Youth Succeed as Young Parents"** by Rebecca Shafer and Tom Welshonce

*Spring 2022 Children's Rights Litigation newsletter from the American Bar Association. Read it [here!](#)*

## KidsVoice at the National Association of Counsel For Children National Conference

KidsVoice Supervisor Jennifer McGarrity and Attorney Robert Lykos, with Jennie Hedges, Senior Program Manager with FosterEd: Arizona, presented "Pandemic Education Response: How Attorneys & Community Providers can Recoup COVID Learning Loss for Youth in Foster Care."

KidsVoice Attorney Samantha Barclay, with Lucy Johnston-Walsh, Penn State Dickinson School of Law, and Allison Ware, Allegheny County Public Defender's Office, presented "Fine is Bad: Preventing Unnecessary Criminal Records and Fines for Transition Age Youth."

*"It's just an awesome feeling knowing that I didn't have to go through this alone. I didn't have to be scared or have to feel like, you know, the worst was going to happen to me."*

Dezare, a KidsVoice client, speaks during the NACC conference



# 2022 Photo Gallery



## Tom Welshonce *PA Bar's Child Advocate of the Year*

"I remember thinking, 'Why me?' There are so many other people who are so deserving of this. But it really did make me feel proud to accept an award like this on behalf of my teams and the office because the work that we do is incredible. I'm not at the magistrate's or in juvenile court every day, but I get to play a part in all of that. I'm proud of the really great work that we all do." [Read more](#)



### Kites for Kids May 14

Thousands of guests joined KidsVoice at Carnegie Science Center for a day of crafts, learning—and giant bubbles! In honor of the event, KidsVoice clients were able to visit the museum for free.



### Guardian Recognition October 12

Held this year at Threadbare Cider, this annual event invites KidsVoice's stalwart supporters to socialize and enjoy different venues around the city.



### Taste of Sewickley September 10

Featuring Spanish cuisine, the all-volunteer Taste of Sewickley, a delectable dinner prepared by local amateur chefs, raised glasses—and funds—in honor of KidsVoice.



### Give Big Pittsburgh November 29

Each year on Giving Tuesday, Pittsburgh holds its own Give Big Pittsburgh donation drive. This year's event raised more than \$67,000 for the children we represent! Above, staff get together for a photo to celebrate.



# Justin's Story



*Justin heads to his high school prom.*

*When he misses a call*, 22-year-old Justin's voicemail sums up the energy with which he approaches life: "Remember every day's a good day. Always smile and never give up."

Justin is an artistic young man who is quick to make friends, help others, and crack a joke to make someone smile.

But things have not always been easy for the young adult, who became a KidsVoice dependency client at age 17 and continues to receive services through our Expansion team.

"KidsVoice is really good at communicating and actually takes the time to listen to you," said Justin. "I tell so many friends and family that ... KidsVoice will get stuff done. They don't play around."

Justin was born in Latvia, where he lived until he was 15 years old. After participating in a holiday visitation program connecting orphans with local host families, his host family decided to adopt him.

The transition turned out to be more difficult than anyone anticipated.

Justin was experiencing immense change. Moving from an orphanage to a family home halfway across the world, he was separated from friends and caregivers. His mental and behavioral health suffered.

His English was not always strong enough to express his needs.

Further complicating matters was Justin's physical health. Justin has complex medical needs, which were made even more so after problems arose from an experimental surgery to treat severe scoliosis just before his adoption, limiting his mobility.

KidsVoice was appointed Justin's Guardian ad Litem (GAL) two years later, in 2017. He had been placed in a residential treatment facility by his parents. Designed only for short stays, he had already been there a year. His parents were not in a position for him to return home.

As GAL, we represented Justin's best interests in juvenile court, which oversees dependency cases. Our first priority was to find a safe, long-term placement where Justin could continue to address his physical, mental, and behavioral health, and prepare him for adulthood.

“ ” — *Story continues next page.*

**KidsVoice is really good at communicating and actually takes the time to listen to you.**

*Justin, KidsVoice Client*

Our advocacy resulted in his placement in a small, specialized group home that provided one-on-one attention while maintaining the structure Justin needed. We also advocated for a full review of his medical needs. For example, he was not enrolled in therapy.

“When I was really younger, you guys helped me get the right supports,” Justin remembered. “Like therapists and the right doctors. KidsVoice fought for me.”

At the time, Justin was enrolled in a private education facility designed for students with learning disabilities, but he did not feel challenged there. When named his educational decision maker by the court, we successfully advocated for his enrollment in public school, where he began to build a community for himself.

Justin’s case team, including staff attorney Deirdre Shope and child advocacy specialist Shelly Cook, have remained among his staunchest supporters, celebrating his birthdays, graduations, and creative endeavors together.



*Justin greets guests at the 2022 Kites for Kids.*

“ —

**Justin has this way of drawing people to him. He has built his own community.**

*Deirdre, KidsVoice Attorney*

When Justin took part in a program that teaches youth to write, produce, and perform their own music, they were there cheering him on at the end-of-program showcase.

When his dependency case closed when he turned 21, we made sure that Justin was ready to live on his own. We connected him to a transitional housing facility where he could live on his own in an accessible apartment while having staff nearby in case of an emergency.

“When I first moved in, it was scary and was a lot of work,” said Justin. “But now it feels nice to have the freedom to do things on my own. I feel like I’ve got some responsibilities now. I know what needs to be done every month, like paying rent.”

One part of the puzzle had still not been put into place, however.

When a child is adopted from abroad, gaining citizenship is typically a smooth process. Justin’s citizenship, however, was never granted. The reason was unclear. No longer a Latvian citizen but not yet an American one, Justin became stuck in citizenship limbo.

Getting Justin a Green Card turned into a five-year endeavor.

*Story continues next page*

KidsVoice connected Justin to an immigration clinic, acting as a liaison between the two. Since Justin had turned 18, the path to citizenship became more complicated, requiring extensive paperwork, original and translated documents from Latvia, interviews, and medical exams.

The time it took to gather the documents meant that previously completed steps expired and had to be done again.

Meanwhile, Justin was eager to get a job, but wasn't able to without documentation. He was also ineligible for important government supports, such as rental assistance.

“

I like KidsVoice because they never give up.

*Justin, KidsVoice Client*

But his trust in KidsVoice to get it done never wavered: “I like KidsVoice because they never give up,” he said. Added Tom Welshonce, supervisor of the Expansion team, “Justin was obviously quite anxious with all of this. I think it was reassuring to him to know that a lawyer he knows and trusts was working on it.”

In Fall 2022, with another deadline looming, Tom was able to track down the final elusive document required—Justin's original birth certificate—and hand delivered the completed packet.

One of the first things Justin did when he received his Green Card in the mail—after calling his KidsVoice team—was go out and apply for jobs. He quickly found one at a casual eatery downtown. He has been enjoying the responsibility and independence the job fosters.

While our advocacy for Justin is far from over—we work with youth through age 24—it is a big relief for his team to know that, *whatever happens, he will always be able to call Pittsburgh home.*

**In his free time, Justin practices photography. The photos below are two of his originals.**







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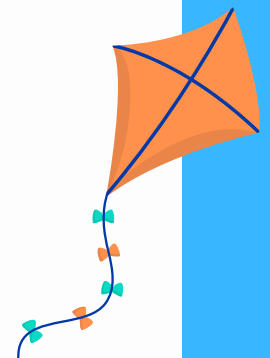
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### The Pittsburgh Steelers

KidsVoice teamed up with Minkah Fitzpatrick (shown at right speaking to a group of donors) this past football season for another successful Tackle & Turnover Campaign, raising \$42,000 for current and former foster youth. We were also chosen to be a beneficiary of the Steelers Social Justice Fund. Thank you, Steelers!



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