About the Children’s Advocacy Institute

Based at the nonprofit University of San Diego (USD) School of Law since 1989, the Children’s Advocacy Institute (CAI) is the nation’s premiere academic, research, and advocacy organization working to improve the lives of children and youth, with special emphasis on improving the child protection, dependency court, and foster care systems and improving outcomes for youth aging out of foster care, homeless youth, and other transition age youth populations.

Producing the Next Generation of Child Advocates. CAI’s academic component trains law students and attorneys to be effective advocates for children throughout their legal careers. The centerpiece of CAI’s academic program is Child Rights and Remedies, a survey course covering the wide range of issues relevant to child advocates. Among other things, students study principles in dependency and delinquency law, tort issues relevant to children, criminal law, and current constitutional issues affecting children’s rights. And through its Child Advocacy Clinic at the USD School of Law, CAI provides second- and third-year law students with the unique opportunity to represent children in three distinct ways: (1) In the Dependency Clinic, CAI interns assist attorneys in the representation of parties in Dependency Court proceedings; (2) In the Delinquency Clinic, CAI interns assist the San Diego County Public Defender’s Juvenile Division in advocating on behalf of delinquent youth under the jurisdiction of the Juvenile Court; and (3) In the Policy Clinic, CAI interns pursue research, writing, and/or policy advocacy projects at the state or federal level on a variety of issues, such as foster care, children’s health coverage, juvenile justice, and education.

The USD School of Law offers a Concentration in Child Rights, and an increasing number of law students are graduating with this distinction — demonstrating their commitment to the practice of child advocacy. And the USD School of Law is now home to the Fellmeth-Peterson Faculty Chair in Child Rights, which will assure the continuation of CAI as an academic part of USD and as an effective advocate for children.

Putting Children’s Issues on the Public Agenda. Through its offices in San Diego, Sacramento, and Washington, D.C., CAI’s research and advocacy component seeks to leverage change for children and youth through impact litigation, regulatory and legislative advocacy, and public education. Active primarily at the state and federal levels, CAI’s efforts are multi-faceted — comprehensively and successfully embracing all tools of public interest advocacy to improve the lives of children and youth.

★ Impact Litigation and Amicus Activity. On its own or with the assistance of pro bono partners, CAI identifies and takes a lead role in trend-setting impact litigation. For example, in California State Foster Parent Association, et al. v. Wagner, et al., CAI proved that California was in violation of federal law by failing to pay foster family homes rates that consider and cover the actual costs of raising foster children; because of CAI’s efforts, higher reimbursement rates went into effect during 2011. In addition, CAI frequently participates as amicus curiae (friend of the court) in state and federal proceedings.
★ **Research and Public Education.** CAI’s research and authorship on the plight of children and youth have put important child-related issues on the public agenda, and have resulted in policy changes not only in California but nationally. CAI’s most recent reports include *A White Paper on America’s Family Values: The Facts About Child Maltreatment and the Child Welfare Financing System* (Sept. 2018), which highlights how Congress is failing to adequately fund programs designed to protect the nation’s most vulnerable children; *Steps Forward* (Jan. 2018), which summarizes progress on state and federal implementation of recommendations made by the federal Commission to Eliminate Child Abuse and Neglect Fatalities; and *Failing U* (Jan. 2018), which analyzes the extent to which each state protects our veterans and other students from for-profit postsecondary predators.

★ **Legislative and Regulatory Advocacy.** CAI maintains full-time legislative and regulatory advocacy offices in Sacramento and Washington, D.C., and has long been a leader in achieving significant policy changes for children, such as successfully sponsoring legislation improving California’s public disclosure policy governing the release of information regarding cases of child abuse or neglect that result in the death of a child; successfully sponsoring legislation declaring that each child who is the subject of a dependency proceeding is a party to that proceeding, and as such is entitled to competent counsel, among other things; and playing a critical role in the implementation of the Kids’ Plates personalized license plate program (license plates featuring a heart, star, plus sign, or child’s handprint), which raises millions of dollars each year for child health and safety programs.

★ **Leadership, Coordination, and Public Awareness.** For almost three decades, CAI has convened and chaired regular meetings of the Children’s Advocates’ Roundtable, an affiliation of over 200 of California’s children’s policy organizations, to provide a setting for advocates to share resources and information, as well as collaborate and strategize on projects that promote the interests of children and youth. CAI is also a leader at the national level. CAI Executive Director Bob Fellmeth served on the Board of Directors of the National Association of Counsel for Children (NACC) for 26 years, including a two-year term as Board President. He currently serves as Treasurer of Partnership for America’s Children and on the Board of Directors of First Star. He has served on the Board of Directors of Public Citizen since 1995. CAI’s National Policy Director Amy Harfeld currently sits on the NACC Board of Directors, and actively participates in several national coalitions such as the National Foster Care Coalition, the Child Welfare and Mental Health Coalition, and the Children’s Rights Committee of the ABA’s Section of Litigation.

CAI administers the Price Child Health and Welfare Journalism Awards, which have been presented annually since 1992 to recognize excellence in works that bring to light a significant issue impacting the health, welfare and well-being of children and advance the understanding of child health and well-being issues. And CAI has authored dozens of opeds that have appeared in publications such as the Los Angeles Times, Sacramento Bee, San Francisco Chronicle, Los Angeles Daily Journal, Huffington Post, The Hill, and San Diego Union-Tribune, among others.