Legal Literacy Clinic

Evaluation Case Study

2018
Introduction

This case study features the Legal Literacy Clinic (LLC or the Clinic), a unique program that is the first of its kind and was developed entirely by the John Howard Association (JHA). The program is designed to help youth who reside at the Cook County Juvenile Detention Center (JTDC) to:

• Gain access to information about the legal system
• Build a better understanding of the impact of detention, incarceration and the criminal charges they face
• Communicate better with their attorneys
• Advocate for themselves

This case study is designed to address a set of research questions, including the following:

• What is the nature of the need for the Legal Literacy Clinic?
• What is the reach of the Legal Literacy Clinic? How many sessions have been offered and approximately how many youth participants have been served?
• What is the theory of change that guides the Legal Literacy Clinic? What activities are done and what outcomes are expected?
• Do youth participants gain a better understanding of the legal system and court processes and procedures?
• Do youth participants communicate better with their attorneys?
• Do youth participants feel empowered to advocate for themselves and have a sense of agency in their case?
• What do youth participants experience and/or do differently as a result of their participation in this program?

The case study evaluation method was selected because JHA’s Legal Literacy Clinic is a unique program which does not allow for the capturing of results directly from youth participants in a systematic manner due to the safety and security restrictions imposed by the JTDC. This case study provides an opportunity to reflect on the need, purpose and influence of the Legal Literacy Clinic on youth participants.

Methods

The data sources employed for this case study include a document review, clinic observation by an external evaluator, structured interviews with key informants and a set of youth participant case examples. The documents reviewed for this case study included a program overview, the program’s theory of change, JTDC staff quotes and observations about the program, youth participant quotes about the program, funder grant proposals and reports, and a collection of Dear Maya letters (correspondence between youth and clinic teachers designed to document frequently asked questions and common circumstances). The interviews conducted for this case study were semi-structured, used an interview guide and included questions that invited perspective on the needs of youth, clinic operations and the value and benefit of the Clinic to youth, parents, public defenders and other actors in the criminal justice system. Interviews were conducted during the summer of 2018 and included:
• John Howard Association staff, including the Legal Literacy Clinic Director
• Volunteer Attorneys who facilitate the Clinic ("clinic teachers")
• Illinois Supreme Court Justice Anne Burke
• Cook County State’s Attorney Kim Foxx
• Cook County Public Defender Amy Campanelli

Interviews provided insight into how the Clinic operates, the nature of the dialogue between youth and clinic teachers, the types of questions that youth ask most often, the topics explored most frequently and the observed value and benefit of the Clinic to youth participants and other actors.

The youth participant case examples were documented by the Legal Literacy Clinic Director and describe the lived experiences of youth residents of the Cook County Juvenile Temporary Detention Center who participated in the Legal Literacy Clinic.

Limitations

It should be noted that the case study evaluation approach, like all evaluation methods, has inherent limitations. For example, this case study relies on observations from an external evaluator as well as individuals who have either facilitated or observed the program, but does not include interviews or other formal data collection from youth or parent participants due to restrictions established by the JTDC, which are due to the unique nature of a secure environment. Youth case examples provide insight into the range of youth experiences in the program and rely on the observations and recall of Clinic staff. Ideally, this evaluation process would have incorporated perspective from a range of stakeholders including current and past youth participants, parents of youth residents, program staff and volunteers, and JTDC staff.

This evaluation approach was selected after other methods were considered but could not be pursued due to several constraints. First and foremost were the limitations inherent in the program because it operates necessarily in the secure environment of the JTDC which has significant restrictions on tracking and collecting data. Additional constraints included the short and unpredictable nature of most youth residents’ length of stay, the need to maintain confidentiality of minors, JTDC rules related to soliciting feedback from residents and staff, and the limited ability to follow-up with youth following their stint at the JTDC. Other methods that were considered but ultimately determined not feasible included brief structured confidential interviews with current and former youth participants and with JTDC program staff, and program feedback forms (e.g. surveys) that youth participants could review and complete anonymously.

The limitations of this study point to an opportunity for future research and, in particular, an evaluation of the Legal Literacy Clinic that includes data collection from JTDC staff, youth participants and their parents.
The Need

The youth and families who are involved in the criminal justice system are often from groups that are among the most marginalized in society. As such, they lack the resources (e.g. financial, mental health, education, knowledge and access to social institutions) that are critical to being enfranchised, and often only encounter the legal system under duress. Without the knowledge and experience to effectively navigate the criminal justice system, their ability to advocate for themselves is limited.

The need for the Legal Literacy Clinic was first formally identified by mental health staff at the JTDC who noted that youth residents lacked basic knowledge of legal terminology and the legal process. Staff observed that this lack of knowledge was a source of significant stress and anxiety, as well as feelings of frustration and powerlessness and difficulties with adjustment to the environment. This stress and anxiety often presented as erratic behavior, bad choices and youth acting out while in detention.

This identified need at the JTDC is consistent with findings from a study\(^1\) by the Children and Family Justice Center in collaboration with the National Juvenile Defender Center, which concluded that representation of juveniles in Illinois falls well short of national standards. Most notably, this study cited the lack of communication between youth and their attorney prior to arriving at court as a significant deficit.

More broadly, research in the field has observed that youth offenders are less likely to comprehend legal jargon than adults\(^2\). Fortunately, research also suggests that youth who have access to legal information and understanding of court processes and procedures and who feel that they have a voice and can participate in and be heard in court proceedings are more likely to adjust better to detention and less likely to have future criminal justice involvement and recidivism\(^3\). Specifically, research has found that children’s perceptions of fair procedures are based on the degree to which the child was given the opportunity to express her feelings or concerns, the neutrality and fact-based quality of the decision-making process, whether the child was treated with respect and politeness, and whether the authorities appeared to be acting out of benevolent and caring motives\(^4\).

Research in the field consistently points to the need for the perception of systemic fairness and suggests that people care enormously about the process and greatly value the opportunity to “tell one’s story,” regardless of the outcome\(^5\). More specifically, children’s limited knowledge and understanding of the criminal justice system, which has been explored at great length in both social science research and legal scholarship, underscores the importance of creating a system that young offenders perceive as fair and impartial.

\(^{1}\) Source: [http://www.law.northwestern.edu/about/news/newsdisplay.cfm?ID=175](http://www.law.northwestern.edu/about/news/newsdisplay.cfm?ID=175)

\(^{2}\) Source: [https://ilr.law.uiowa.edu/assets/Uploads/ILR-99-S-Quinn.pdf](https://ilr.law.uiowa.edu/assets/Uploads/ILR-99-S-Quinn.pdf)

\(^{3}\) Source: [http://psycnet.apa.org/record/2013-35900-001](http://psycnet.apa.org/record/2013-35900-001)

\(^{4}\) Source: [http://www.buffalolaw.org/past_issues/57_5/Birckhead%20Web%2057_5.pdf](http://www.buffalolaw.org/past_issues/57_5/Birckhead%20Web%2057_5.pdf)

Another key component of the youth participants’ ability to engage in and participate in their own defense is their ability to communicate with their lawyer. Youth accused of crimes and kept in detention frequently have a public defender appointed to represent them. Often, public defenders have large caseloads, may have limited experience and are not trained in either adolescent development or communicating with minors. Further, public defenders frequently have neither the time nor an understanding of the need to explain legal terminology and the court process to their client. “They are really spread thin,” according to clinic teachers. At the same time, youth residents of the JTDC do not have a clear sense of the role that their attorney plays, the knowledge that they should trust their attorneys and communicate with them openly, or even know how best to contact their attorney.

In addition to this range of needs and challenges, the need for a mechanism such as the Clinic was reinforced by several key stakeholders who hold leadership positions in the criminal justice system. These key stakeholders articulated the stark reality for youth who are residents of the Cook County Juvenile Temporary Detention Center and described the life circumstances that many of the youth face including living in disadvantaged neighborhoods, lack of access to education, lack of access to jobs and other challenges. One key informant, Illinois Supreme Court Justice and child advocate Anne Burke, said:

“**Young people have no knowledge of juvenile court or the legal system. They do not know how they should engage or behave. They have no understanding of expectations that the system has of them.**”

In order for youth to engage in the process, she reiterated that, “it is absolutely vital that these young people have some ability to know what is expected of them” and noted that “we (the courts and the system) must flip the way that we work to be better for kids. We must be more creative, and it is up to us to do this. We cannot expect them to know what to do.”

Furthermore, another key informant, Cook County State’s Attorney Kim Foxx, observed: “More often than not, kids have their heads down (and feel that) things are being done to them. They are trying to get out unscathed and are waiting to be talked to. They are completely passive.” She went on to say that “all the participants (i.e., judges, attorneys, others) in the legal process want to be a part of a system that is legitimate and one in which all are engaged.” In order for youth in detention to be engaged, there has to be “some relationship building between the lawyer and their client. This relationship will allow for deep representation. You want the client (in this case, the youth) to feel heard or it undermines the whole process.” Therefore, she continued, “anything that can be done to have procedural legitimacy and recognizes the importance of people who are impacted by the system and gives them a way to participate fully – helps all of us.”
In particular, Ms. Foxx noted:

“Having an outside group (like the Clinic) say that you should trust your lawyer can help to bolster the work of the lawyer and to increase the youth’s confidence and willingness to engage with their lawyer. This enables them to have a more robust case.”

Cook County Public Defender Amy Campanelli noted “the more that youth know, the more they understand, the more they trust the process. Having faith in probation, the lawyers and judge is critical.” Ms. Campanelli also reinforced that having knowledge and understanding of the system are essential and noted that it can take a long time to build trust between the attorney and the child, especially if the youth does not understand who their lawyer is and that he/she is on their side.

“It is difficult to counsel youth on the next step in their case, but it is especially challenging if there is no relationship, rapport or trust. Establishing a relationship with their attorney is critical and the foundation for trusting the system.”

Without understanding the role their attorneys play and how and why it is in their interest to communicate openly with them, youth are not able to establish this kind of trust, and thus feel disenfranchised and victimized by the system. If youth do not have access to explanations of court room terminology and actors, accurate information, clarity on what to expect and how to behave as well as which questions to ask, then youth are not well prepared to engage with the legal system. This leads to increased stress and anxiety and can also lead to poorer outcomes.

**Theory of Change**

The Clinic is designed to address the unique needs of youth in detention. As described above, youth in detention have very limited knowledge of the criminal justice system, and the Clinic aims to provide access to this information to improve youth understanding, alleviate fear and strengthen their ability to advocate for themselves.

The Clinic focuses on building youth participants’ knowledge of legal terminology, rights, system actors, court processes and procedures as well as example cases and potential consequences of different decisions. In addition, the Clinic aims to improve communication between youth and their attorneys. The Clinic offers youth participants a chance to ask questions, which in turn allows them to better understand their own situation and feel comfortable asking questions of their lawyers and advocating for themselves.

A key feature of the program is access to the clinic teachers who are independent, neutral third parties with extensive knowledge of criminal law. The attorneys who facilitate the Clinic are State Appellate Attorneys who volunteer their time. They use a range of methods to share information including in-person clinic sessions, phone calls, a repository of case examples (Dear Maya letters), real world scenarios and other methods. This range of methods provides youth with opportunities to ask questions and relate
these examples to their experience and case. The information that is shared with youth is designed to be clear, credible and accurate legal information, and clinic teachers answer youth questions directly and honestly. The information shared is not case specific. Further, these attorneys do not provide direct representation to these youth; rather they are there to provide information, explanations, and support. Clinic teachers are careful to maintain and respect the attorney-client confidentiality that exists between youth and their appointed or retained counsel.

In addition to their experience and extensive knowledge, clinic teachers receive significant training from the JHA Legal Literacy Clinic Director on adolescent development and communication tactics, techniques and best practices for building trust and rapport with clinic participants. Clinic teachers work to build trust with youth participants to ensure that they feel comfortable asking questions. This training ensures that the program is positioned to provide developmentally and cognitively appropriate information that is tailored to youth participants.

During sessions for youth, the clinic teachers provide structured dialogue, share examples of situations and invite participants to ask questions. The topics of discussion often include the following:

- Clarity about roles and responsibilities of the people in the courtroom
- Basic legal terminology and criminal justice system processes
- Explanations of what is expected of youth in court
- Clarity about what to expect from attorneys and key “scripts” for engaging with attorneys (e.g., leaving an appropriate voice mail, asking a question)
- Current law and sentencing related to particular crimes
- Confirmation/demystification of knowledge on particular aspects of the law, court or legal system or process
- Possible outcomes or consequences of different court decisions

The Clinic is designed to achieve the following outcomes for youth participants:

- Expand youth access to information about navigating the legal system and court processes and procedures
- Build youth knowledge and understanding of legal terminology, rights, court processes and procedures
- Increase youth understanding of and confidence in the attorney/client relationship
- Empower youth to advocate for themselves and develop a sense of agency in their case
- Empower youth to make decisions in their own case with a clear understanding of possible outcomes and consequences

In addition to the sessions offered to youth participants, the Legal Literacy Clinic also provides sessions for parents of youth residents of the JTDC. The evening sessions are offered monthly and are designed to provide parents, who often also lack knowledge and understanding of legal terminology and systems, with reliable, accurate information.
Clinic Implementation

To date, the Clinic has organized an estimated nearly 300 sessions and reached approximately 3,500 participants over 6 years of operation. In order to accommodate as many eligible JTDC youth as possible, youth residents are able to attend the Clinic once per month. Each clinic session includes between 10 and 15 youth participants (one JTDC “pod”) and lasts for about one hour. The program is housed within the mental health program portfolio at the JTDC as it is considered an important support that contributes to youth resident social and emotional well-being.

As part of this evaluation process, the external evaluator attended and observed a clinic session at the JTDC. This process provided insight into what the Clinic provides to the youth participants as well as the role that clinic teachers play in setting the stage for the Clinic and engaging youth participants. Clinic teachers started building rapport with youth participants immediately after youth arrived in the room. They then provided clear explanations to youth participants about who they were, clarified that they were not the youth participants’ lawyers and reminded the youth that it would be important that they only ask questions of a hypothetical nature and not directly about their case or the circumstances involved in their case. If there were no immediate questions or observations from youth participants, the clinic teachers quickly began to explain how the justice system works, who the different actors are, and then shared example questions, cases and observations.

Initially, youth participants seemed disinterested based upon their body language, but as some youth began to ask questions, other participants seemed to listen more. Peers signaling that they were willing to engage with the clinic teachers seemed to open the door for other participants to ask questions.

As the session continued, the culture of the room shifted and there was more of an active exchange between clinic teachers and youth participants on topics that seemed to feel familiar to youth, their case or their situation. This question and answer dialogue continued for the rest of the Clinic, and the increase in youth interest was observable through their body language and involvement: sitting up at their desks, leaning in, and asking questions. It became clear that once one participant signaled that he was comfortable asking a question, others in the group did the same. By the time the session was completed, nearly every youth participant had asked a question, made a comment or offered an example.

The clinic teachers set a positive and open tone and made it very clear to the youth participants that they were available to them outside of the actual clinic session. Youth participants have become comfortable asking questions of clinic teachers by relaying questions through the mental health staff at the JTDC via phone call, text messages, writing Dear Maya letters and/or having a one-on-one conversation with the clinic teachers during the session about a particular question. This last approach allows those youth who may be reserved or less confident to have their questions answered without an audience of their peers.

From observing this session, it appears that youth who have attended the Clinic in the past come prepared with questions to pose or may bring issues supplied by other youth residents of the JTDC.
Frequent topics of discussion include sentencing ranges, risks of plea bargains, and suppressing evidence and the role of police.

In addition to youth clinics, the Legal Literacy Clinic offers evening sessions one time per month to provide parents with an opportunity to ask questions and identify ways in which they can support their children including gathering or gaining access to information or records that could be relevant for their child’s case (e.g. mental health assessments/records, school records). As with the youth participants, the parent sessions also help to clarify what to expect from the public defender and the other actors in the justice system. Per the clinic teachers, the parent sessions play an important role as “the parents are the ultimate voice of authority. If they do not understand what is going on it can lead to confusion for the kids.” The parent sessions thus aim to ensure that parents receive the same information as their child and that they are supported through the legal process.

**Clinic Results**

**Youth Observations**

Over the years, youth participants have offered insight into the value, influence and impact of the Clinic. The following quotes were collected from youth participants by clinic teachers in 2016 and highlight the benefits provided by the Legal Literacy Clinic:

- “There are always a lot of rumors about new laws, but every time I go to the legal clinic I learn the truth about what’s going on with my case”
- “The legal clinic has helped me because if I have a question about a certain law or sentencing law they can tell me or give me information about it and how it works”
- “They can explain things that I don’t understand”
- “The legal clinic is helpful because they explain motions and cases to me”

The following quotes highlight the hope and confidence provided by the Legal Literacy Clinic to youth participants.

- “The legal clinic helped me because it keeps me informed on all legal issues that are like my case and it gives me hope”
- “Knowledge is power, and the legal clinic provide me with knowledge”
- “The legal clinic helps me get through my court process, all the information that they bring was always helpful with my case”

In addition to reviewing past youth perspective, this case study includes insights from clinic teachers who provided perspective about the role and influence of the Clinic. They described the Clinic as a way to help the youth participants “feel more powerful and less confused.” They also described the Clinic as a platform for participants to learn “a little about the law and how things work” so that youth residents “feel more comfortable, ask more questions, communicate better with their public defenders and know how best to behave in court.”
Clinic Teacher Observations

Clinic teachers offered a number of examples of youth participants showing signs of increased confidence in themselves for having a stronger command of this knowledge and their situation. Because the tone of the Clinic is very open, responsive and positive, the youth residents drive the discussion and are invited to ask questions. One clinic teacher described the youth participants in the program in this way: “These boys are scared. We provide them with a bit more courage.”

In addition, clinic teachers observed that youth participants who attend sessions more frequently demonstrate the greatest comfort in Clinic. They speak right away, bring questions to the discussion, offer more complex, sophisticated or directed questions, and seem to have a clear idea of what is happening in their case.

According to the clinic teachers, the information shared in the Clinic helps youth participants communicate more clearly with their public defender and to ask particular and focused questions in order “to be ready for the very small moments in which they will have an opportunity to talk with their attorney or speak in court.” One clinic teacher went on to say, “if we can explain legal terminology and system (to youth), it will allow the public defender to dedicate more time to direct information about the case versus broad conversations about the nature of the system or law.”

In addition, according to the clinic teachers, the Clinic provides youth with enough of “a knowledge base to communicate with attorneys and to know what to expect from their attorneys.” According to another clinic teacher, the information gathered through the Clinic helps youth “to feel more powerful, less discouraged and more trusting of their public defender,” which is critical for engaging in their case and their own defense.

Clinic teachers also noted that the Clinic provides an opportunity to “reduce the gibberish effect” and enables youth to understand the legal terminology that is used but often not explained in the courtroom setting. The Clinic helps youth to fully understand and make sense of what is happening in the court and in their case and to “dispel myths about laws and procedures.” JTDC staff also noted that clinic teachers bring the legal system information “onto a level so that the kids can use it” and that this is important because it helps the youth participants feel “less frustrated and powerless.”

The Legal Literacy Clinic provides youth participants with “a sense of being heard, being able to take some kind of ownership over their court process, which is often very fast-paced and brief and creates a very helpless kind of feeling,” according to a clinic teacher. Furthermore, youth participants “get to feel that they know something about their case and they are taking a role and some control” which can create a sense of empowerment and help youth become “less bewildered by the legal system.”

The Clinic can help youth participants “know what is going on and that they can do something about it, which will be less stressful for them,” according to a clinic teacher. Youth participation in the Clinic
provides a way to hear examples of other cases and circumstances and can remind them that the process takes time and not to be discouraged.

**JTDC Staff Observations**

Along with the attorneys that run and staff the Clinic, the JTDC staff recognize that they do not have the expertise to help youth residents answer their questions and noted that the “clinic does an amazing job of addressing the huge questions” that are posed by youth participants in a small amount time. JTDC staff also mentioned that they “would love to see them [the Clinic] here weekly because the kids are going to court all the time” and more frequent Clinics would mean that they could share information with youth residents more often.

The Clinic setting provides youth with an opportunity to practice their “assertiveness skills and questions asking skills.” JTDC staff indicated that youth residents often inquire, “When are the legal ladies coming back?” and noted that they eagerly anticipate when they will be able to attend the Clinic. In addition, staff noted that they find that youth residents share information that they learn through the Clinic with other youth residents at the JTDC.

**Case Examples**

The following case examples represent real youth experiences with the Legal Literacy Clinic and provide evidence of the influence that the Clinic can have upon youth. The names of youth have been changed in accordance with juvenile confidentiality laws and to protect youth participants.

The Clinic provides youth with access to information to build their knowledge and understanding of the system and help youth understand the importance of communicating with their attorney. For some, as in the case of the youth participant below, it provides relief from worry and clarity about the future.

David was particularly anxious about his potential sentence in a case in which he had already pled guilty. His attorney explained the basics of the required sentence, but he was too embarrassed to ask what “day for day credit” meant as it related to the time he was supposed to serve. During the Clinic, David came in with a description of the statute under which he was to be sentenced, and clinic teachers were able to go through the statute line by line to explain what each term meant. David was visibly relieved that not only was his sentence exactly what he was promised, but that he was right to trust his attorney and plead guilty.

For another youth participant, the Clinic offered access to information about her rights as a parent and helped her to understand what could influence her parental rights and what could not. The Legal Literacy Clinic helped to inform her thinking, and ultimately, her approach to her case.

Michelle was distressed because she had heard from other youth at the JTDC that if she was found guilty of a crime that she would never be able to see her child again. After the clinic director
explained how the law works in this regard, Michelle understood what her parental rights were and that a single infraction as a juvenile was not enough to terminate those rights. Michelle and the clinic director went through a “checklist” of her rights as a parent and what she could do going forward to ensure that she could be reunited with her child. This led to Michelle accepting a guilty plea, which resulted in her getting probation and services such as parenting classes to support her on the path to reunification with her child. Michelle reached out the JTDC staff before she left the facility to ask them to thank the clinic team for their help.

Detention is a stressful environment with a lot of unknowns for youth residents. For this youth participant, the Clinic offered access to information that helped him gain clarity about what his sentence might mean, which was a significant source of relief.

Armando was anxious in detention and was sent to the medical unit for extreme physical reactions to stress. He was aware that he would have to “do time” for his current offense but was in severe distress about being incarcerated in the Illinois Department of Juvenile Justice (IDJJ). During the Clinic, it became clear that Armando believed that when he turned 18 he would have to be sent to Stateville or IDOC, i.e. an adult correctional facility. After clinic teachers explained that IDJJ and IDOC are different state agencies for different populations in state custody and that sometimes people interchange them, it became clear to him that since he was found guilty in juvenile court, he would serve his sentence in a juvenile facility. Armando’s relief was palpable, and his physical stress reactions subsided. He was able to return to general population and prepare for his move from the JTDC to an IDJJ facility.

Legal terminology and definitions can be confusing, especially for those without a legal background or training. For this youth participant, the Clinic helped to clarify the definition of an important term, shifted his thinking and made him feel more confident in and trusting of his attorney and therefore better able to engage in discussions about his case.

Alan, who was being tried in adult court, was adamant in the Clinic that he would never request a jury trial despite his attorney strongly encouraging him to do so. After participating in the Clinic and learning what a jury trial was and how the jury was selected, a lightbulb went off for Alan. He had always thought that only the State was able to select the members of the jury, which was why he was going to reject a jury trial in his own case. When asked in the Clinic about his confusion, he said that it never occurred to him that he was wrong, so he never expressed to his lawyer that he did not want a jury because he thought he would have no input. After gaining this knowledge and clarity, Alan was more confident in his lawyer’s strategy and advice in his case and felt that they could have a meaningful conversation about his case and about having a jury trial.

The protocols and expectations of how to engage with the legal system can be confusing for those with little or no experience in the system and for young people who communicate differently based on their
generational differences and stage of development. For this youth participant, the Clinic offered clear guidance on how to contact and engage his attorney, and as a result opened the lines of communication and addressed the youth participant’s frustration about his attorney’s lack of responsiveness.

Cal was angry in the Clinic because he believed that his lawyer was not communicating with him. He said that he had called his attorney many times and had not received a response. During the session, the clinic teachers reviewed how to leave an appropriate and clear voice message for their attorneys. It quickly became apparent that Cal was either not leaving a voice message at all or leaving an incomplete message. The minor believed that his attorney had caller identification and would most certainly know that he called. Cal admitted that he would leave a message with his first name only, omitting his full name and JTDC unit. The clinic teachers explained that the best way to leave a message in order to get a response was to include his full name, JTDC unit, next court date, and a brief explanation of why he was calling (e.g., “I would like to discuss guilty plea options.”) The JTDC staff reported to the clinic team that he left the kind of voice message they discussed in the Clinic and his attorney responded promptly, which in turn relieved his stress and frustration.

Accurate information about the law, legal terminology and the courts are not easily accessible to youth who reside at the Cook County Juvenile Temporary Detention Center. In fact, misinformation is often shared unknowingly among youth residents. For this youth participant, gaining access to accurate information about some of the circumstances of his case from the Clinic provided new clarity and informed his decision on how to approach his case.

Jorge was confident about the status of his case and was chiding the other youth for considering taking a guilty plea in their cases. He stated that he refused to accept the guilty plea because he knew he was going to win his case. When asked why he thought so, Jorge said that the victim in his case did not show up to the routine status dates in court. He was certain that the victim would not testify against him. He understood that the “rule” was that if the victim did not testify, he would win the case. He related that he learned this rule from a guy who won his case for this reason. He also stated that his lawyer must be “stupid” because she had not discussed this rule with him or the court. The clinic teachers explained to Jorge that he was incorrect; that rule did not exist, and that the victim only needed to appear for trial. (Although he was generally correct that if the victim is a no-show for trial, then the case could be dismissed.) Further, the clinic teachers explained that the State kept in close contact with the victims and could order them to come to court. After the clinic teachers followed up with the Jorge on the phone, he understood the rule and how it applied to his case. He ended up deciding to take a plea in his case because he felt and understood that it would likely lead to the best outcome for him given the facts of his case.
Conclusion

The Legal Literacy Clinic is one-of-a-kind in its focus and scope and therefore there is neither a precedent nor a model which exists for evaluating its effectiveness. The program provides much needed information, guidance and support to youth inside of the Cook County Juvenile Detention Center. The Clinic addresses the unique needs of detained youth by providing basic definitions of legal terms, accurate information about the legal system, demonstrating how youth can effectively engage in the process and clarifying the role of different actors in the system. As described in the case examples above, youth participants can become better equipped to actively participate in their case, communicate with their attorney, ask questions and advocate for themselves.

The Clinic offers a unique and effective model to support youth residents of the JTDC and could be used to provide information and support to youth at other juvenile detention centers. In fact, to date, two other juvenile detention centers in the state of Illinois have asked JHA to implement the Legal Literacy Clinic in their facilities. Due to resource constraints, JHA is not currently able to provide the Clinic in any of the other 15 juvenile temporary detention centers in Illinois. Additional evaluation and research are needed to fully account for the value and impact of the program for participants, but this case study provides examples of the type of impact and influence that the Clinic is capable of delivering.

Given the limitations explained above, there is an opportunity to pursue a more robust examination of the Legal Literacy Clinic in the future. Constructing ways to systematically collect data from youth participants about their experience with the Clinic, the value they gained and observations about opportunities to improve the Clinic going forward would be helpful to understanding what outcomes the Clinic affords but will be difficult to create and implement due to the rules governing detention centers and treatment of juveniles in custody.

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Note: This case study was designed and developed in partnership with a third-party evaluation partner, Kim Silver, Principal, The Silver Line.