

**Statement of Lourdes M. Rosado, Esq., Associate Director,
Juvenile Law Center**
April 1, 2009

On behalf of Juvenile Law Center, I want to thank Senator Baker for inviting me to participate in today's briefing.

Juvenile Law Center has been working for many years to challenge and put an end to the systematic denial of children's fundamental constitutional rights in the Luzerne County Juvenile Court. To their credit, it was the panicked calls from distraught parents that sounded the alarms. We heard story after story of parents arriving at the courthouse doors with their children, having been told that they didn't need an attorney for such a minor offense. The hearings often lasted only minutes. And as the gavel came down, parents could only watch in horror as their crying children were handcuffed and shackled, swept away without so much as a goodbye. The doors of the Luzerne County juvenile court swung only one way for children, and parents exited alone. Too many of these children received neither the legal representation nor justice they deserved. Juvenile Law Center began to examine the state's own data on Luzerne County and confirmed what was already suspected - that since 2005, more than 50% of juveniles appeared in Luzerne County Juvenile Court without benefit of counsel – nearly ten times the state average – and of the adjudicated youth who did not have attorneys, nearly 60% were taken from their homes and placed in court-ordered facilities.

So many people here in Pennsylvania, across the nation and around the world have joined Juvenile Law Center in expressing outrage over the Luzerne County Juvenile Court's abuse of its children. The public has sent a clear message that what happened to these children and their families is unacceptable. We are particularly grateful to Senator Baker for taking a leadership role to introduce legislation that will both help to provide some remedy for the affected youth and, perhaps more importantly, prevent anything like this from ever happening again in Pennsylvania. Juvenile Law Center has pledged to work with Senator Baker and her staff to draft legislation.

I also think it is critical for us to remember that the scandal in Luzerne County represents a gross diversion from Pennsylvania law and is by no means the state standard. Pennsylvania's juvenile justice system has rightly been regarded as a progressive model by other states. In fact, the John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation chose Pennsylvania to be the first state to participate in its national Models for Change juvenile justice reform initiative precisely because Pennsylvania is known as a flagship state in juvenile justice law, policy and practice. The despicable actions of those who participated in the proceedings of the Luzerne County Juvenile Court should serve as a harsh reminder that we still have improvements to make.