











Justice for Families (J4F) was founded in 2011, and is a nonprofit organization run by parents and families who have experienced the juvenile justice system first hand, through the involvement of their children. In 2012 J4F released *Families Unlocking Futures: Solutions to the Crisis in Juvenile Justice*. The report's findings were drawn from surveys and focus groups conducted with 1,000 family members of incarcerated youth. It presented a body of data that had never been captured or examined before, and from it grew a number of recommendations for things systems can do to both improve how families are treated, but also ways in which families can be effectively engaged in case-level decision-making and system reform work.

Recommendations for treatment of families along the case continuum





Upon Arrest

-  Notify families immediately in the event of an arrest
-  Notify families where a youth is being detained
-  Prohibit questioning of youth by police prior to parent or guardian notification and consultation with their child
-  Offer the support of an ombudsperson or other neutral party with whom families can file complaints of police maltreatment

Prior to Court

-  Establish public defender meetings with families prior to court hearings as a jurisdictional best practice
-  Allow families to discuss their child's case with probation staff, and to participate in discussions over what treatment, incentives/sanctions, supervision, or service plan will be recommended to the judge
-  Provide families with a clear and detailed orientation to the language and procedures of the court process, as well as ongoing counseling/support to answer families' questions and address their concerns. This support should be delivered via peer counseling from other parents/family members that have experienced the juvenile justice system
-  Provide assistance to help the family retrieve their child from juvenile hall if transportation or childcare difficulties interfere

Court

-  Provide families an opportunity to speak
-  Provide families a limited time window to know when their case will be heard
-  Allow families to say goodbye to their loved ones when a youth is placed in custody
-  Create a 'jury duty'-like public service provision excusing families from work duties for important cases involving family members

Probation

- ✍ Provide families frequent outreach from probation officers to keep parents/families informed of their child's progress
- ✍ Notify families immediately if their child begins to violate terms of probation or misbehave in other ways (missed school, failed drug test, violated curfew, skipped required appointments, etc.)
- ✍ Involve families in discussions and decisions about how best to support youth success
- ✍ Work with families to introduce incentives for compliance with probation terms and not just sanctions
- ✍ Offer services at hours that correspond with the schedules of working families

Release from Custody

- ✍ Provide families with sufficient notice to prepare for the release of their child from a placement
- ✍ Consult and involve families in post-release planning
- ✍ Provide families with support to ensure that youth are able to re-enroll in school, continue any necessary counseling services, and identify employment opportunities

And Beyond

- ✍ Governments should work with the private sector, philanthropy and others to support and partner with parent & family advocacy organizations

Strategies for effective family engagement

1. Ensure Meaningful Parent/Family Participation in Critical Decisions

Youth justice systems should work to ensure that parents and families play a central role in all decisions that impact their children. Parents and families should not only be invited and encouraged to participate in various meetings and hearings, but they should also share some level of decision-making power. Discussions should be conducted in everyday language, rather than bureaucratic jargon or terminology.

One example of involving families in the critical decisions that impact their children is the state of Connecticut's Case Review Team (CRT) conferences. These conferences are designed to explore all community-based options before any young person is committed to residential custody. The conferences include family members, other supporters identified by the youth, probation staff, school personnel, social workers, mental health providers, and the young people themselves. Of the 597 CRT meetings convened during the first two years Connecticut employed this process (2005-2007), 72 percent of participating youth avoided out-of-home placement. Parents and families are uniquely positioned to know what mix of help, services, and opportunities will help a young person succeed. A substantial share of these youth avoided any subsequent contact with the justice system, or had only very minor involvement.

2. Create, Encourage, and Sustain Peer Support Programs for Families of Court-Involved Youth

One of the most consistent themes across the focus group discussions was a sense of family members' frustration with having no one to talk with who understood the stress they were going through. Families who have previously been involved with the juvenile justice system have great knowledge and expertise, and could be utilized to help explain the system process, answer questions, and provide helpful guidance and advice to those families are just entering the system.

For many family members, experiencing the trauma and difficulties of having a loved one in the justice system initiates a personal imperative to develop structures of support for other parents, and to advocate for a different system. It behooves system personnel to tap into this resource and partner with family members that have firsthand experience. They are the ones that are best positioned to effectively orient and support new families just entering the juvenile justice system.

Juvenile courts and probation agencies can establish peer support programs in several ways: working with an existing parent organization, reaching out to community organizations with the capacity to engage and mobilize families of court-involved youth, or by directly hiring parents/family members of youth currently or formerly involved in the justice system. While all of these models are viable, working with existing parent organizations and community-based organizations can help ensure that peer-support advocates are connected to the communities they serve. Examples of successful peer-support programs exist both within and outside the field of juvenile justice.

The National Child Traumatic Stress Network (NCTSN) has provided helpful guidance for incorporating peer-to-peer support in their programs. Although NCTSN targets mental health and treatment providers, their tips can certainly be applied in any child-serving setting. Please refer to the attached resource titled, "Tips for Incorporating Peer-to-Peer Support into Your Program."

For specific application in the juvenile justice arena, lessons can be learned from the Parents Involved Network (PIN) in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. PIN regularly attends juvenile court and meets with family members in the court's waiting room before cases are heard. In the first nine months of 2011, over 100 families received assistance from PIN's two family advocates.

While all peer-to-peer work is helpful, efforts that couple peer support strategies with organizing and advocacy offer the greatest potential to transform youth-serving systems for the better. Examples of combining peer support with leadership development and collective advocacy include organizations like, Families and Friends of Louisiana's Incarcerated Children (FFLIC) and Books Not Bars of the Ella Baker Center for Human Rights. It is imperative that families understand their rights and that they be able to influence the decisions large and small that impact their children and communities.

3. Ensure Parents and Families Have a Meaningful Voice in Crafting and Reforming Youth Justice Policy

While family involvement in their own children's cases is critical, it is simply not enough. Across the country, juvenile justice policy must be completely re-examined and families must be involved in these discussions. An overwhelming 92 percent of families surveyed stated that families should be engaged in local, state, and federal policy discussions regarding how juvenile justice systems work. Yet 73 percent reported they had never been part of such discussions.

Family members and youth should be represented in all policy-making and oversight bodies charged with juvenile justice system oversight and reform. More and more, youth justice system leaders are acknowledging that family involvement is a crucial ingredient for success. Yet achieving meaningful family engagement at this level is far more difficult in jurisdictions where families are not organized and trained to understand (1) how the system works; (2) how they can play an effective role as advocates; and (3) how they can be leaders in overall system reform.

Community-based organizations can play a valuable role in developing the capacity for meaningful family partnership and leadership in youth justice systems. Local governments, private foundations, and others should provide grants, contracts, stipends, and other financial support for these kinds of parent and family advocacy organizations.

Family engagement and leadership at the policy level has proven valuable in the mental health field. The concept of family-driven care has transformed not just how services are provided but also how policy decisions are made regarding which services to provide to families of children with mental health needs. In fact, the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Agency (SAMHSA) issued a practice guide for states on how to engage families at this level, and it was authored by a family-led organization.

Finally, families, youth, and other impacted community member stakeholders must be compensated for their expertise and time. There are resources available to assist in figuring out how to fairly compensate families. For example, NCTSN, again in offering guidance to mental health providers, supplied answers to frequently asked questions. Please refer to the attached resource titled, "Frequently Asked Questions on Compensation for Family, Youth, and Consumer Involvement."

http://www.nctsn.org/nctsn_assets/pdfs/Pathways_CompensationTipsheet.pdf

J4F, by drawing on our network of parents and families across the county, are in a unique position to provide guidance, support, and technical assistance to systems who are interested strengthening family engagement through policy and practice. Please visit our website, www.justice4families.org, to learn more and to download a free copy of our report, *Families Unlocking Futures: Solutions to the Crisis in Juvenile Justice*.