

THE **ESSENTIAL** NEED FOR
PARTNERING WITH YOUTH AND
FAMILIES TO **FUNDAMENTALLY**
TRANSFORM JUVENILE
PROBATION

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AUTHOR'S NOTE

This brief uses the terms "juvenile justice system" and "juvenile probation" because they are commonly understood terms in the youth-serving field. CJJR recognizes, however, the connotation and underlying biases the word "juvenile" can evoke and encourages all readers to use strength-based language when referring to young people.

ABOUT US

The Center for Juvenile Justice Reform at Georgetown University supports and educates leaders across systems of care to advance a balanced, multi-system approach to improving outcomes for, and promoting the positive development of, youth at risk of juvenile justice involvement.

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THE ESSENTIAL NEED FOR PARTNERING WITH YOUTH AND FAMILIES TO FUNDAMENTALLY TRANSFORM JUVENILE PROBATION

INTRODUCTION

In 2019, the Center for Juvenile Justice Reform at Georgetown University's McCourt School of Public Policy (CJJR), with support from the Annie E. Casey Foundation (Casey), launched the Transforming Juvenile Probation Certificate Program. The goal of this program is to guide and support cross-system teams from around the country to fundamentally transform their system-wide approaches to probation. Seven communities participated in the inaugural program, and in 2022, CJJR and Casey hosted the program again to support an additional cohort of three jurisdictions. The Certificate Program is based on two foundational works: The Casey Foundation's Transforming Juvenile Probation: A Vision for Getting It Right (The Annie E. Casey Foundation, 2018), and the Center for Juvenile Justice Reform's and Council of State Governments Justice Center's Transforming Juvenile Justice Systems to Improve Public Safety and Youth Outcomes (Weber et al., 2018).

This brief focuses on one of the values and strategies at the core of the Transforming Juvenile Probation approach—that is, the essential need for partnering with and empowering youth and families in probation policy and practice. In that regard, it reviews research literature on youth and family partnerships, and discusses challenges and strategies related to this most important endeavor. The brief is the first of three that will highlight themes central to the Transforming Juvenile Probation Certificate Program and the national movement to fundamentally transform juvenile probation policies and practices.

The Need for Juvenile Probation Transformation

While juvenile justice systems in the United States have seen significant advancements in the past two decades, including historic drops in youth arrests and incarceration rates, recidivism rates have remained alarmingly high, and youth and families involved in the legal system continue to experience poor and inequitable outcomes. Further, while probation is the most common disposition in the juvenile justice system, systems across the United States have not fully aligned their probation policies and practices with a developmental approach—one that recognizes the science on youth development and embraces a more holistic, collaborative, therapeutic, and community-centered philosophy to serving youth and families.

One merely needs to examine the experiences and outcomes faced by youth and families of color who touch probation to understand the need for transformative change. In nearly every jurisdiction in the U.S., racial and ethnic disparities persist. Youth of color are overrepresented in the probation population with recent data indicating that youth of color comprise 55 percent of probation dispositions nationally, while only comprising 44 percent of the general youth population (The Annie E. Casey Foundation, 2021b). In 2019, Black youth were placed on probation three times as often as White youth; American Indian youth were placed on probation two and a half times as often as White youth; and Latino youth were also more likely to be placed on probation than White youth, though the exact number placed on probation is more difficult to pinpoint due to gaps in data collection regarding Latino youth (The Annie E. Casey Foundation, 2021b). Disparities exist at various stages in the system, too, including at key probation decision points that lead to youth incarceration. It is striking that in 2019, two thirds of the youth placed in residential custody as a result of technical violations of probation were youth of color (The Annie E. Casey Foundation, 2021b).

To combat these disproportionalities and disparities, and to improve outcomes for youth, families, and communities, it is essential that juvenile probation be transformed from a mechanism to control, surveil, and punish youth to a support system that promotes positive youth development, advances racial equity and fairness, and meets the holistic needs of youth and families alike. Probation policies and practices that truly partner with and empower youth and families are essential to this approach.

BENEFITS OF YOUTH AND FAMILY PARTNERSHIPS

Engagement has been defined as roles or activities that enable youth and families to have “direct and meaningful input into and influence on systems, policies, programs, or practices affecting services for children and families” (Child Welfare Information Gateway, 2017; “Definitions of Family Engagement,” n.d.). While engaging youth and families is an essential first step, engagement is more effective when combined with a partnership component (The National Child Traumatic Stress Network & Institute for Translational Research in Children’s Mental Health, 2020). Partnership takes engagement a step further by regarding youth and families as equal decision-making partners and mutually and meaningfully working with them at both the individual case and systemic levels. It means working closely with youth and families to identify their needs, deciding collaboratively what should be done to meet those needs, and delivering services and supports to them in a strength-based manner.

Youth and family partnerships have proven benefits for youth, families, and communities. When system officials meaningfully engage with youth, for example, youth are able to share important information about their lives and describe the types of supports they need to succeed. In collaboration with youth and families, probation staff and partners can then use this information to make more informed decisions regarding case planning and service delivery that set youth up for long-term success (Coalition for Juvenile Justice, 2014). In this light, it should be no surprise that youth- and family-centered approaches have been linked to positive youth outcomes like higher levels of academic engagement, increased numbers of prosocial relationships, and decreased likelihood of recidivism, all of which benefit youth, families, communities, and the system as a whole (Butts et al., 2018).

Most family members want to support their children and be actively engaged in their cases while involved in the juvenile justice system. Previous studies have demonstrated that 91 percent of family members believed that the courts should involve families more in making decisions about youth who are adjudicated delinquent, and 86 percent of family members were interested in becoming more involved in their child's treatment while incarcerated (OJJDP, 2018; Justice for Families, 2012; Vera Institute of Justice, 2014). While fully engaging all families at all stages of the justice system may be challenging at times, striving to do so is vital, as strong family involvement serves as a buffer for youth against potentially harmful external influences such as peer pressure and immediate incentives (National Research Council, 2013; Shanahan & diZerega, 2016). Family engagement also helps to promote youth's safety, permanency, and well-being (Child Welfare Information Gateway, 2017; McCarthy, 2012; OJJDP, 2018; Jackson et al., 2019), and for those youth in custody, studies have actually shown that family visitation is linked to youth's positive behavior and academic achievement while in the facility (Mikyuck and Woolard, 2020; Agudelo, 2013).

Strong youth and family partnerships can benefit juvenile justice staff as well. When youth and families see that their voices are substantively included in decision-making, they are more likely to forge positive relationships with system officials and experience greater trust and confidence in the juvenile justice system and related systems of care (The National Child Traumatic Stress Network & Institute for Translational Research in Children's Mental Health, 2020). These positive relationships, coupled with improved youth, family, and community outcomes, can increase the morale of probation staff and partners because they are better able to see the positive impact of their efforts. Given research demonstrating the linkage between job satisfaction and work climate in the juvenile probation context (Krupa, 2020), promoting youth and family partnerships arguably contributes to a more fulfilled workforce.

BARRIERS TO YOUTH AND FAMILY PARTNERSHIPS

As juvenile probation officials strive to meet the needs of youth and families, it is important they examine and overcome barriers that may impede strong partnerships with them. Below are examples of common obstacles experienced by youth, families, and system officials and partners across the United States.

Biases, Racism, and the Adultification of Youth of Color

Several studies have found that probation officers and other juvenile justice practitioners often view and treat youth of color differently than their White counterparts. For example, a set of studies found that law enforcement and probation officers viewed youth they believed to be Black as “less immature, more culpable, and more deserving of punishment” than those they perceived to be White (Graham & Lowery, 2004; National Juvenile Justice Network, 2017). Another study found that Black youth received harsher sentencing recommendations from probation officers compared to White youth who committed similar offenses, in part because the officers were more likely to perceive Black youth as personally responsible for the offenses they committed, whereas they perceived offenses by White youth to be caused by external factors (Bridges & Steen, 1998).

These findings are part of a growing body of research on the adultification of youth of color, which demonstrates that some children are treated as adults as a result of a variety of personal characteristics and societal factors, making them less likely to be viewed as needing or deserving supports and services (Stern, 2021; Henning, 2021). One study, for example, found that Black children are regarded as adults by juvenile justice practitioners as early as age 13, with overestimations of Black youth’s ages exceeding four and a half years in some cases (Goff et al., 2014). In contrast, assumptions of childhood for White youth can extend well into their early 20s (Goff et al., 2014).

Biases, racism, and the adultification of youth of color—coupled with youth and family members’ keen awareness of the racial and ethnic disparities that exist within the justice system—present significant implications for establishing strong youth and family partnerships. Accordingly, in order to strengthen those partnerships, system officials must embrace the advancement of racial equity as a key priority in all juvenile justice policy and practice.

System Distrust Based on Past and Current Experiences

Youth and families may not trust the juvenile justice system based on previous and current experiences, which can make it more challenging for probation officers to form positive relationships with them. In many communities of color, for example, juvenile justice agencies and other social service agencies may be regarded as oppressive as a result of

generational trauma related to the legacy of racism in these agencies (Crosby, 2016). Furthermore, because of the history of systemic racism in these agencies, youth and families may not believe these agencies care about their best interest, furthering their distrust in these systems. This can keep persons of color and other marginalized groups from fully engaging with treatment or services.

More individual forms of trauma may also make it challenging for probation officers to engage with youth and families. Families often report prior system experiences where they felt blamed or judged by officials for their children's system involvement, perpetuating feelings of guilt, shame, and isolation among families (Arya, 2013). Youth themselves may have also experienced trauma, including witnessing violence, being separated from their families as a result of incarceration, or suffering harsh treatment from law enforcement or probation officers. All of these experiences can prevent youth from fully trusting probation staff and the system at large (The Annie E. Casey Foundation, 2022). In light of this, it is essential for probation officials and juvenile justice practitioners to engage youth and families in a trauma-responsive and non-judgmental way.

Failure to Fully Appreciate and Meet the Needs of Youth and Families

The long-term success of any system-involved youth is inextricably linked to the success of their family. After all, it is the youth's family who will support the youth long after their system involvement ceases. Unfortunately, however, in many jurisdictions juvenile probation systems do not take a holistic approach to meeting the needs of youth and families alike, which can negatively impact families' ability to fully engage in the youth's case.

Families may have a variety of basic needs related to housing and healthcare (including medical, mental, and behavioral healthcare) and may lack adequate economic resources, access to transportation, and other social supports. At the same time, families often juggle multiple responsibilities with respect to employment, child care, and their children's education and health. In this respect, it becomes critically important that juvenile justice practitioners craft their approaches to fully appreciate and meet the needs of families. This means avoiding practices often used in juvenile probation that require families to navigate complicated systems without support and attend court and probation meetings without regard to their work and family obligations or their access to transportation. It also means more explicitly providing direct services and supports to families themselves, as described below.

Failure of Systems to Actively Engage Youth and Families

Even if youth and families are ready, willing, and able to engage with systems of care, these systems may still not meaningfully include youth and families in decision-making

processes. Creating spaces for youth and families to share their perspectives and then actively incorporating these perspectives into case planning is an essential element of partnership. Systems must intentionally prioritize the viewpoints and suggestions of youth, families, and others with lived system experience at all parts of the process, but especially when making decisions about case plans and probation conditions.

In this effort, family partnership must be incorporated as an agency mindset. System practitioners should recognize that all families care for their children, have strengths that can be built upon, and must be engaged and empowered at all stages of justice system involvement (The Annie E. Casey Foundation, 2017). The section below will offer key considerations to ameliorate potential barriers in this area.

ESTABLISHING STRONG YOUTH AND FAMILY PARTNERSHIPS IN PROBATION POLICY AND PRACTICE

Juvenile probation staff and partners have ample opportunities to develop and sustain strong partnerships with youth and families. Below are a series of strategies designed to achieve this goal at both the individual case and systemic levels.

Make Youth and Family Partnerships a Key System Priority

The mission, vision, and values of every juvenile probation agency should clearly prioritize the goal of establishing and maintaining youth and family partnerships. This emphasis on partnership should be reinforced in how the agency creates and implements policies, trainings, staff supervision, quality assurance, and outcome measurement mechanisms. Key questions to examine in this respect include:

- Does the agency clearly communicate its commitment to and goals for sustaining youth and family partnerships to staff, youth, families and other stakeholders (e.g., via its website, youth and family orientation materials, staff training curricula, legislative testimony and reports, and other communications vehicles)?
- Do agency policies and procedures support youth and family partnerships? For example, does policy clearly articulate expectations around strength-based case planning in collaboration with youth and families? Does policy speak to the need for directly providing families with services? Are facility visitation policies flexible to account for the fact that families have multiple job- and household-related responsibilities?

- Are agency staff trained on youth and family engagement and communication strategies? Is this training offered for new hires as well as on an ongoing basis for all agency staff (e.g., refresher trainings)?
- Do supervisors hold agency staff accountable for the ways they treat and partner with youth and families, including recognizing them when they do the work well?
- Does the agency conduct quality assurance strategies to ensure that staff are operating in line with agency priorities with respect to youth and family partnerships (e.g., case reviews, quantitative data analysis)?
- Does the agency track key outcome measures related to youth and family partnerships at both the process and system levels (e.g., number of staff contacts with youth/family; youth/family linkages to services; youth/family satisfaction with the agency)?

Broadly Define "Family"

To create the most successful youth and family partnerships, probation agencies must start with a broad definition of family. Given that youth have a diverse array of family structures and support systems, probation staff should craft their approaches to engage not only those family members related to the youth by blood or through marriage or adoption, but also other trusted individuals who have a positive impact on the youth's life, such as teachers, coaches, clergy members, and mentors (Shanahan & diZerega, 2016). On a systemic level, this means ensuring that system policies and procedures utilize a definition of family that extends beyond biological parents and legal guardians and captures the full set of supporters in the youth's life. On a case practice-level, probation officers should empower youth and their families to define who makes up their family, and then engage those individuals in the youth's case (The Annie E. Casey Foundation, 2021a).

To promote these family connections, probation officials should simply ask youth and families about the youth's support system, examining the strength and diversity of this circle of care and any potential gaps within it. These conversations should be revisited throughout a youth's time in the system, beginning at the inception of the youth's system involvement and continuing throughout the case planning and management process (The Annie E. Casey Foundation, 2021a).

Simplifying the Language that Probation Professionals Use

To engage youth and families as equal decision-making partners, probation officers need to use language that is accessible to youth and families when partnering with them. This language should limit the use of jargon and system acronyms as much as possible and instead use terms that youth and families will understand. To the extent possible, providing youth and families with accessible written or recorded materials explaining system processes can also be a helpful way to make sure they understand the system they are navigating. This should extend to documents that are linguistically accessible to youth

and families if they speak another language (OJJDP, 2018).

Without an understanding of how the system works or what is being discussed, youth and families cannot meaningfully contribute to system transformation efforts. To this end, youth and families should also be offered training on the justice system and connected to resources, such as peer advocates or credible messengers, to help them navigate and become familiar with system processes. With this understanding and support, youth and families will be able to more effectively advocate for their needs (The Annie E. Casey Foundation, 2021a).

Empower Youth and Families to Drive Case Planning

Case planning represents a great opportunity for juvenile probation agencies to demonstrate their commitment to youth and family partnerships. In many jurisdictions, however, juvenile probation officers have traditionally developed case plans without fully collaborating with youth and families in a strength-based manner. As a result, case plans are often created that impose a litany of standard probation conditions and requirements that do not speak to the strengths and individualized needs of youth and families and do not lead to full ownership or buy-in on the part of youth and families.

The Annie E. Casey Foundation's (2022) Family-Engaged Case Planning model offers a more strength-based approach to engaging youth and their family members

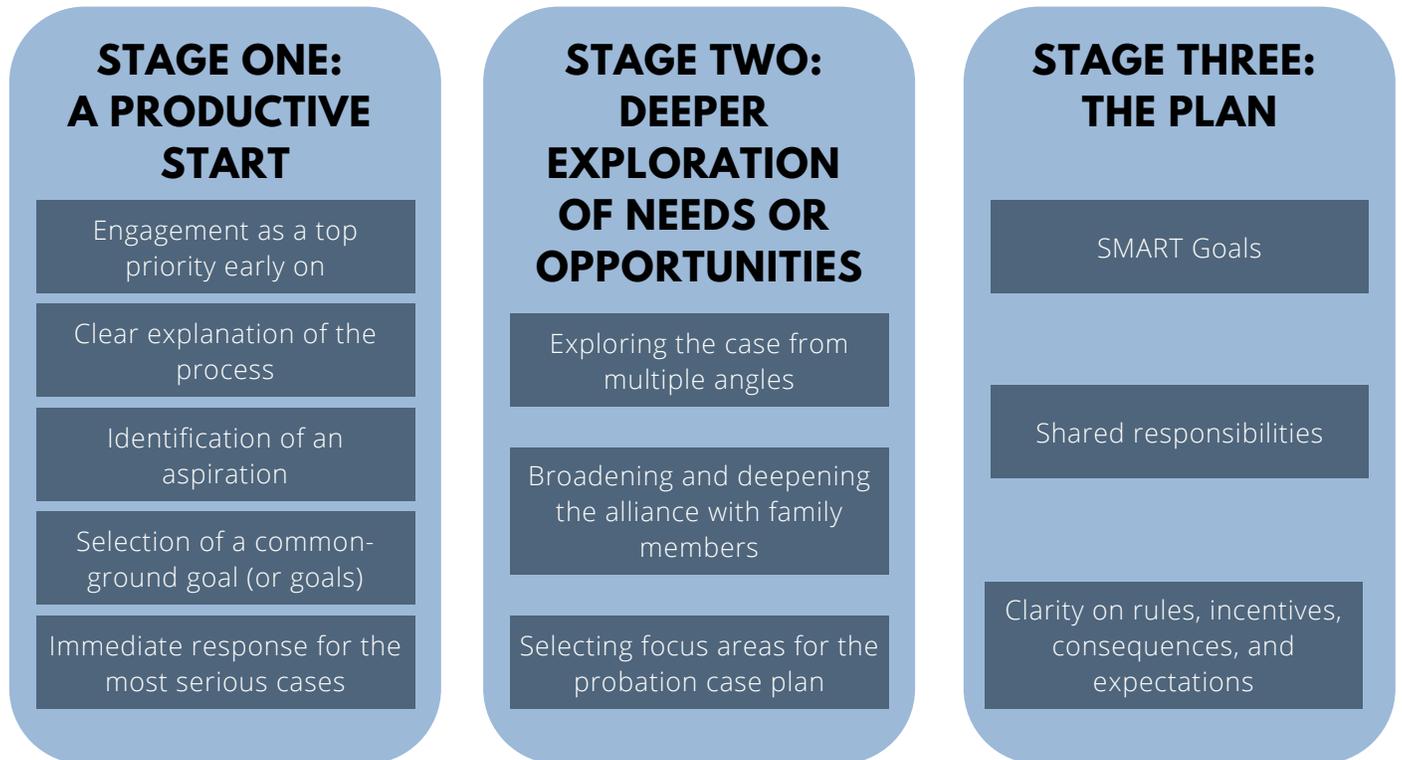
in the case planning process. The overarching stages in this process include engaging with family members early to establish common goals and an understanding of system processes, utilizing families' expertise to inform youth's case plan, and creating a case plan that is agreed upon and understood by all parties. Some additional points about these stages are listed in the graphic on the next page, and the publication can be accessed [here](#).

In leading case planning efforts, it is important for practitioners to recognize that engagement

SPOTLIGHT ON THE 2019 TJP CERTIFICATE PROGRAM COHORT: STARK COUNTY, OH

After attending the 2019 Transforming Juvenile Probation Certificate Program, the multi-disciplinary team from Stark County, Ohio built upon previous probation reforms by actively engaging their court's behavioral health specialist earlier in the probation process. Now involved from the inception of probation cases, including at initial orientation meetings with youth and families, the specialist serves as an additional advocate who can assist youth and families to navigate the system and support them through the case planning process. This practice change is helping Stark County create more informed case plans and forge stronger relationships with the youth and families they serve (D. Wilson, personal communication, February 9, 2022).

THE ANNIE E. CASEY FOUNDATION FAMILY-ENGAGED CASE PLANNING MODEL



Source: The Annie E. Casey Foundation (2022). Family-engaged case planning: A guide for transforming juvenile probation. <https://www.aecf.org/resources/family-engaged-case-planning>

and partnership will look different for every youth and family. For example, attending multiple in-person meetings may be difficult for some youth and families, so probation officers may need to turn to virtual meetings to make them more accessible. When possible, meetings with youth and families should be scheduled outside of work and school hours so they can attend without fear of missing out on other important aspects of their lives.

Youth and families may also need additional help to access and benefit from the services and supports outlined in the case plan. For example, probation officers should be thinking about how the youth and families will get to and from their various appointments (e.g., behavioral health treatment and/or mentoring sessions; programming) and how they will ensure that the service providers are a good match with the youth and families they serve.

Address the Needs of Youth and Families as a Whole

While juvenile probation systems are rightly focused on supporting the youth in their care, as noted above, the youth's families themselves may also need their own unique supports in order to help their children thrive. Put plainly, youth without a safe and stable home will likely have a difficult time meeting their case plan goals and achieving long-term success. Thus, probation officers must work to provide individualized supports directly to families, including connecting them to any needed local resources such as housing assistance, food pantries, transportation support, respite care, physical or behavioral health services, or other relevant supports. Depending on their identified needs, probation officials can also link youth and families to evidence-based programs involving family-centered approaches, such as Functional Family Therapy (FFT), Functional Family Probation (FFP), Multi-Systemic Therapy-Family Integrated Transitions (MST-FIT), and Positive Family Support (PFS; Development Services Group, Inc., 2018).

Jurisdictions may also find it beneficial to utilize a peer coach model to help connect families with necessary services. For example, the New York City Department of Probation has implemented a peer coaches program to connect families with coaches who have personally experienced the system with a child or loved one. These coaches help families navigate the system and connect them to necessary resources (The Annie E. Casey Foundation, 2022). The

Lucas County, Ohio Juvenile Court has implemented a similar approach, partnering with the Center of Hope Family Services, Inc. to operate its Family Navigator Program which supports families to better understand the juvenile justice system and links them to social services (see <https://cohfs.org/family-navigator>).

SPOTLIGHT ON THE 2019 TJP CERTIFICATE PROGRAM COHORT: MULTNOMAH COUNTY, OR

For years before attending the 2019 Transforming Juvenile Probation Certificate Program, Multnomah County has invested in Functional Family Probation (FFP) as an evidence-based model for their probation practices. Through FFP, the county has equipped Juvenile Court Counselors and other probation staff to better meet the needs of youth and families through an approach that prioritizes true alliances with youth and families.

Building off of this effort and others, the Certificate Program team has continued to focus on youth and family engagement as part of their Capstone Project. The team is partnering with the Multnomah Youth Commission to enhance youth voices in their work; has hosted various youth roundtable discussions featuring youth impacted by the system; and plans to launch a Youth Advisory Council to further inform and inspire transformative efforts in their county.

Provide Training and Support to Probation Staff and Partners

Probation staff must be supported to fully embrace youth and family partnerships in every dimension of their daily case practice. To this end, probation officers should regularly receive training on how to effectively serve youth and families, including training on fundamental principles and research pertaining to adolescent development, positive youth development, and trauma-responsive care. Staff should also be trained on how to create safe spaces for authentic youth and family communication and partnerships; this training can be buttressed by practical tools, such as the [list of sample engaging questions](#) developed by the Annie E. Casey Foundation as part of its Family-Engaged Case Planning model. To promote fair and more equitable systems and ensure that negative stereotypes about youth and families do not influence the partnership process, probation staff should also receive recurring training on equity, implicit bias, and cultural responsiveness. As noted above, all of these training efforts should be reinforced by strong supervision and quality assurance mechanisms that recognize staff when they partner with youth and families well and hold them accountable when they do not.

Engage Youth and Families in System Transformation Efforts

In developing new agency policies, practices and approaches, probation officials can benefit greatly from the vast expertise and experiences that youth and families bring to the table. In this light, elevating the voices of youth and families is essential in driving any system transformation effort.

One such vehicle for these transformative partnerships are youth or family advisory councils. These councils, often made up of youth and family members of currently or previously system-involved youth, can help juvenile justice agencies examine issues relevant to youth and families, identify gaps in agency practices, and craft solutions for a better path forward. The Massachusetts Department of Youth Services (DYS), for example, worked with community partners to establish the Family Advisory Council (FAC). Composed of family members of youth currently or formerly involved with DHS, the FAC has supported agency officials to review and enhance various agency policies, including those pertaining to DHS' family engagement efforts.

As another example, the Santa Clara County, California Probation Department partnered with a community-based partnering organization, Fresh Lifelines for Youth, to establish the "Youth Advisory Council" (YAC). Composed of young people, the YAC provides vital input on agency policies and practices and has contributed to many system enhancement efforts over the years, including, but not limited to, the development of a new youth and family orientation to probation; training for newly hired probation officers; and participation in gang prevention initiatives ([see https://fly.program.org/our-programs/youth-advisory-council/](https://fly.program.org/our-programs/youth-advisory-council/)).

In addition to youth and family councils, juvenile probation agencies can utilize a number of strategies to gather important insight from youth and families. This can include employing or partnering with family liaisons who maintain office space in agency buildings and are tasked with supporting families in the process; operating rigorous grievance systems to allow youth and families to raise issues, complaints, and suggestions about agency policy, practice, or treatment; and regularly conducting surveys and focus groups of youth and families to gauge system strengths and challenges, including youth's and families' ideas for system improvement and transformation.

SPOTLIGHT ON THE 2019 TJP CERTIFICATE PROGRAM COHORT: CHARLOTTESVILLE, VA

Following their participation in the Transforming Juvenile Probation Certificate Program, the Charlottesville, Virginia team prioritized youth and family partnership in the development and implementation of their Capstone Project. Below are some of the lessons the Charlottesville team has taken away from this work.

The implementation of any reform effort, including one around youth and family partnership, will not be a quick process. Building trust with youth and families takes time and effort, but this work ultimately pays off in spades.

Forming strong relationships with trusted community organizations is an essential element of youth and family partnership. These community partners can bring additional youth and families to the table and will help probation establish trust with communities that they have had negative interactions with historically.

Probation agency staff must be willing to engage with those who may have feedback they do not like. While it may be easier for practitioners to bring youth and families to the table that they already have positive relationships with, it is arguably even more important to engage with youth and families who may not have had positive experiences with probation. Their constructive feedback is a critical element of making systems more reflective of the holistic needs of youth and families.

Family engagement and partnership should be about what youth and families want, not what systems think youth and families want.

CONCLUSION

In order to truly transform juvenile probation systems and strengthen case practice, establishing and sustaining meaningful youth and family partnerships must be at the core of the work. As this brief highlights, while historically a host of barriers have prevented systems from realizing this goal, there are numerous concrete and actionable steps that systems can take to overcome those obstacles and shape a new approach to probation policy and practice. Ultimately, by demonstrating a relentless commitment to partnering with and empowering youth and families in this way, systems across the United States can and will begin to see significantly improved outcomes for the youth, families, and communities they serve.

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