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Engaging Youth and Families

A Deep-End Evaluation Feature Brief

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Partnering with youth and families involved in the juvenile justice (JJ) system can promote positive youth outcomes and help youth avoid further system involvement (Annie E. Casey Foundation 2019; OJJDP 2018). In this brief, we describe findings from a developmental evaluation of the Annie E. Casey Foundation's (the Foundation's) expansion of the Juvenile Detention Alternatives Initiative® to the deep end of the JJ system. Deep-end reform aims to safely and significantly reduce the use of out-of-home placements for youth, especially youth of color, in juvenile courts. We describe how select jurisdictions engaged youth and families through JJ reform efforts. We also outline the supports that facilitated the meaningful involvement of youth and families. This brief supplements the information presented in *Keeping Youth Out of the Deep End of the Juvenile Justice System: A Developmental Evaluation Overview of the Annie E. Casey Foundation's Deep-End Reform*, which provides an overview of the evaluation of the deep-end reform and its findings (appendix A provides details on methods used for the evaluation). Qualitative and quantitative data collection occurred between April 2014 and August 2018.

First, we explore the reasons for focusing on youth and family engagement as part of deep-end reform and the activities sites pursued to foster it. Then, we describe the technical assistance (TA) the Foundation provided sites to promote youth and family engagement, and end with a discussion of what other jurisdictions can learn from sites' experiences.

BOX 1

Key Findings

- Stakeholders engaged youth and families in three primary ways: (1) by developing resources and supports for youth and families (including through information guides and newsletters); (2) by establishing practices to foster youth and family engagement in decisionmaking at the individual youth level (such as a case planning approach that incorporates the perspectives of multiple people in the youth's life); and (3) by involving youth and families in decisionmaking at the system level (such as through family councils).
- Lessons learned include the following: (1) engaging youth and family at the individual youth level might be less difficult than at the system level, (2) deep-end stakeholders valued youth and family engagement, and (3) external resources can facilitate activities related to youth and family engagement.

Why Address Youth and Family Engagement as Part of Deep-End Reform?

Partnering with youth and families is a main element of the Foundation's deep-end reform of the JJ system, which seeks to minimize youth justice involvement. Families are central to young people's emotional, social, and cultural development. Yet when a youth is involved in the JJ system, family members are often excluded from the JJ process. Moreover, the youth's own goals, hopes, and desired next steps might not be accounted for by JJ system staff. To address this challenge and minimize youth involvement in the justice system, many sites implemented activities to increase youth and family engagement.

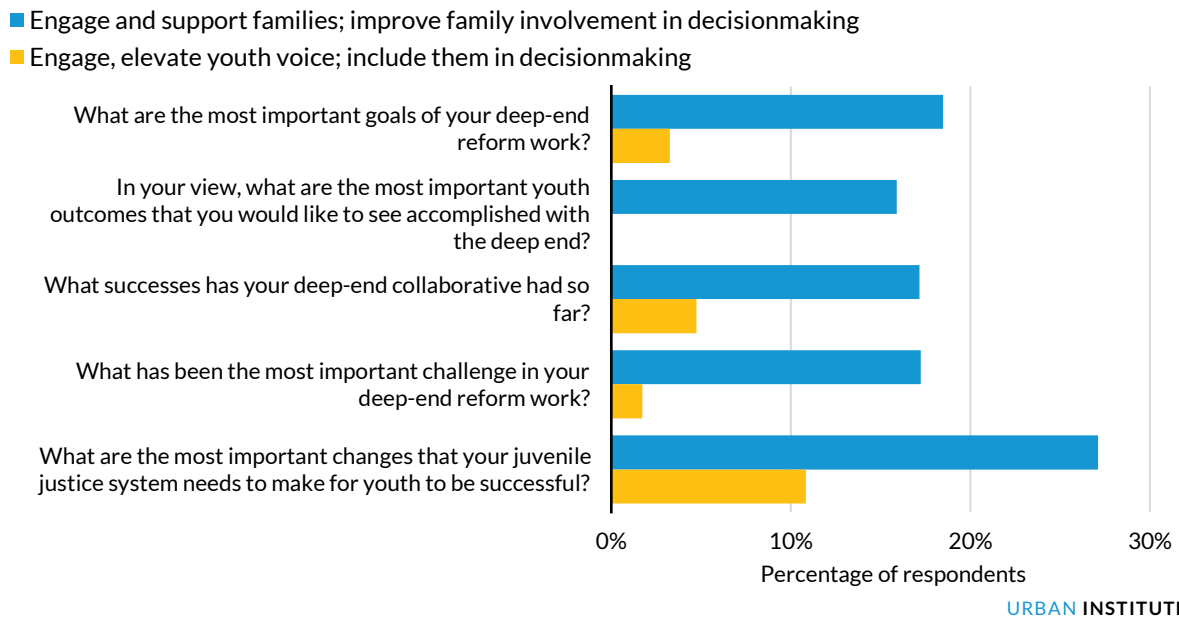
By engagement, we mean that youth and families have a meaningful voice in decisionmaking at the individual youth or case level and the JJ system level.

What Activities Did Sites Pursue to Engage Youth and Families?

All of the sites that participated in each of the evaluation's data collection activities pursued youth and family engagement activities, suggesting stakeholders broadly embraced the principles of youth and family engagement. As part of the evaluation, we asked stakeholder survey respondents to answer a series of open-ended questions about their sites' goals, youth outcomes they hope to accomplish,

successes thus far, the most important challenge they encountered, and the changes the JJ system must make for youth to succeed (figure 1). Although responses underscore the prominence of family engagement as part of deep-end reform, youth engagement was less frequently reported. As figure 1 shows, 18 percent of respondents considered engaging and supporting families and improving family involvement an important goal of deep-end reform, whereas only 3 percent considered engaging and elevating youth voices an important goal. Similar differences occurred for all other questions.

FIGURE 1
Responses Related to Youth and Family Engagement on Stakeholder Survey Questions Related to Deep-End Goals, Youth Outcomes, Successes, Challenges, and Changes the JJ System Must Make



Notes: Blue bars represent deep-end stakeholder responses related to family involvement; yellow bars, youth involvement. Data were collected in 10 sites (Bernalillo County, Camden County, Hennepin County, Jefferson Parish, Lucas County, Marion County, Pierce County, Ramsey County, St. Louis City, and Summit County) via the Stakeholder Survey of Juvenile Probation Policies and Practices (summer to fall 2017; n=242; 79 percent response rate). The percentage refers to the percentage of respondents answering the question. The number of respondents for each question ranged from 166 to 184.

Stakeholders engaged youth and families in three ways, detailed in the sections that follow. First, they developed resources and supports for youth and families involved in the JJ system. Second, stakeholders established practices to foster youth and family engagement in decisionmaking at the individual level. Third, stakeholders sought to involve youth and families in decisionmaking at the system level.

Stakeholders Developed Resources for Youth and Families

To help youth and families understand and navigate the JJ system, stakeholders in three sites developed resources and supports. These included newsletters, gatherings, family navigator systems that include

staff and volunteers to answer families' questions, and resource guides. For example, stakeholders in one site developed a periodic newsletter (available in print and electronic versions) for families that listed resources and described news and upcoming events. Stakeholders in another site developed a family dinner program, organized by a local nonprofit, through which agency staff dined with parents and caregivers of youth who were system involved. These dinners, along with similar activities, provided opportunities to share information. As one stakeholder explained, "The idea is to have a safe place for families to gather. The idea is to be proactive, not reactive...I want to help equip parents with the knowledge they already have to parent their children, to reestablish peace, order, and respect in the household."¹ Two sites provided multiple supports through family navigator projects. A probation officer from one of these sites shared the rationale for developing their family navigator project: "I realized that my families sit in court and they don't know what is being said, what to do, or whether they need to sign something or just wait. There is a lot of anxiety in families because they don't understand [the JJ system]. Having someone show them the way helps." Moreover, some sites published guides with information about the JJ system, the role youth and families can expect to play, and additional community supports for youth and families. Sites then distributed the printed information to youth and families in courtrooms or during meetings with staff.

BOX 2

Site Spotlight: Family Navigators

Camden County, New Jersey, has a family engagement project organized by a family support organization that includes a family navigator staff member located in the courthouse. This navigator works with families, answers their questions about JJ processes, and prepares them for court and its outcomes.

In Lucas County, Ohio, the family navigators program is a key element in supporting the involvement of parents and other caregivers. Staff are located in common areas of the courthouse and connect with families there and at the detention center during visitation periods. Family navigators act as supports, coaches, or advocates for families, assisting them with negotiating the court process and the myriad actors, hearings, and decisions that affect their children.

Sites Engaged Youth and Families in Decisionmaking at the Individual Level

To engage youth and families in decisionmaking at the individual youth or case level, stakeholders in six sites developed and implemented activities around case planning. These activities aim to increase youth and family involvement in decisions about the youth's JJ system involvement, including recommendations on how best to handle their cases. For example, youth and their families in one site partnered with staff to identify achievable goals for the youth before the disposition stage, and youth who attained those goals could avoid probation. One probation officer noted, "The case planning is good. It took a while for all to get on board, but kids can show they have the ability to complete initial goals, which gives us an idea of the level of supervision they might need on probation. And if they keep

completing the goals, then maybe they avoid probation. The opposite is also true. If the youth can't [meet the initial goal], they might need an evaluation."

BOX 3

Site Spotlight: Teaming

As part of a teaming approach to case management (Team Support Approach), staff in St. Louis City Juvenile Court identify and involve all adults in a youth's support network to help young people on probation. The goal is to convene key people to discuss a youth's strengths and needs, identify and provide resources, make plans to increase their access to well-being, repair harm to the victim, and support accountability. The team can also be leveraged before pursuing a probation violation. This approach was facilitated by a nonprofit organization, Better Family Life, which conducted meetings between system stakeholders and families and offered a third-party perspective on how to engage families.

Sites Engaged Youth and Families in Decisionmaking at the System Level

Finally, stakeholders in three sites involved youth and families in decisions at the system level by developing family councils or advisory boards. These could involve youth and families with JJ experience who are asked to regularly review policies and practices and weigh in with their unique perspective. Few sites pursued activities in this area, in part because of difficulty in sustaining youth and family participation. Moreover, stakeholders in one site developed and maintained a family council using a nonprofit community agency as a partner.

BOX 4

Site Spotlight: Family Councils

Stakeholders in Pierce County, Washington, created a family council to involve youth and families in system-level decisions. The council, which a local nonprofit community partner facilitates, obtains input on probation practice and policy from parents and youth with probation experience. It includes three family members and three youth, as well as court staff representatives. Youth members are required to be 18 or older, have completed all their court responsibilities, and desire to use their voices and perspectives for change. The council leadership includes one family member, one youth member, and one court member who all share facilitation duties. The community partner supports the group leaders to help them define roles and ensure everyone's voices are heard.

Note: For more information on site activities, see [appendix C](#).

What Technical Assistance Did Sites Receive to Engage Youth and Families?

The Foundation provided TA to support and guide sites' engagement of youth and families. A critical part of the TA involved helping stakeholders build trust between youth, families, and JJ stakeholders. Stakeholders reported learning from the TA they received and seeking additional Foundation assistance.

The Foundation provided TA in four important ways. First, it assigned team leaders who provided one-on-one [supports to site stakeholders](#). Second, site coordinators regularly attended intersite calls, which provided opportunities to share experiences, challenges, successes, and best practices about all deep-end work (including youth and family engagement). Third, it supported sites through written materials such as resource guides and provided information during grantee conferences to support the TA offered by team leaders. Lastly, in addition to the team leaders, the Foundation employed external TA providers to develop strategies to engage youth and families. For example, Justice for Families shared guidance on developing family councils during one of the intersite calls and as part of national conferences. Justice for Families staff worked with Foundation staff to generate a tip sheet on what to consider when establishing a family council. The tips involved five points: (1) the readiness of agency culture, (2) recruitment strategies, (3) the role and structure of the family council, (4) resources available to prepare family council members, and (5) continuous feedback and ongoing support. Justice for Families facilitated a discussion among those on the call about applying these points in their sites. The call was also an opportunity for participants to ask questions of staff and share their own experiences with developing family councils.

Stakeholders reported that the TA they received enabled them to better understand the importance of engaging youth and families. For example, 96 percent of surveyed stakeholders agreed that deep-end TA “helped [them] better understand the importance of engaging family members as partners in individual cases” (14 percent slightly agreed, 40 percent agreed, and 42 percent strongly agreed). Similarly, 95 percent of surveyed stakeholders agreed that TA “helped [them] better understand the importance of including youth and family voices as part of overall JJ reform” (12 percent slightly agreed, 35 percent agreed, and 48 percent strongly agreed).

Though stakeholders reported better understanding youth and family engagement as a result of the TA they received, some wanted additional guidance on concrete ways to integrate youth and family engagement in their work. For example, some stakeholders considered the TA too general and reported that it did not provide enough details on how to meaningfully implement some of the suggestions. As one stakeholder noted, “We need help from [the Foundation] to bring youth and families to the table in a connected way. We want to engage the families on what it might look like for [families] to consistently engage in these conversations.”

Considerations for Other Jurisdictions: What Can Communities Interested in Engaging Youth and Families Learn from This Evaluation?

Communities seeking to engage youth and families in activities similar to those pursued by the Foundation and deep-end sites might consider the following lessons.

Engaging youth and family at the individual youth level might be less difficult than at the system level. Sites more frequently pursued reform at the *individual youth or case* level than at the *system* level. Only three sites pursued system-level change, whereas five sites pursued individual-level change. Sites made efforts to move the needle on youth and family involvement at the system level less frequently, perhaps because of the unique challenges and effort required. Stakeholders also expressed frustration about engaging youth and families in meaningful ways at this level.

Deep-end stakeholders value youth and family involvement. By implementing varied activities to involve youth and families in decisionmaking, stakeholders tasked with developing reforms demonstrated their commitment to improving how the system engages with youth and families. The diversity of activities stakeholders pursued suggests they worked creatively to foster connections with youth and families.

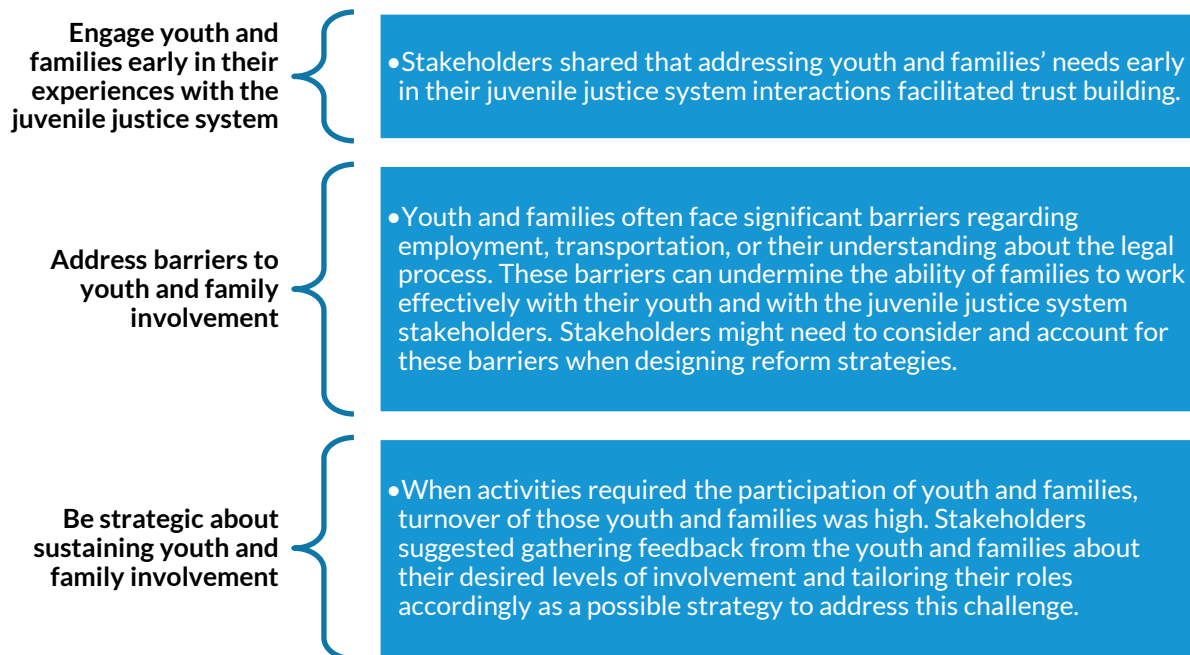
Bringing in external resources can facilitate activities related to youth and family engagement. Stakeholders valued the TA provided by the Foundation and welcomed the supports and resources provided by the team leader, especially when the TA helped them build relationships with community-based partners. Given the sometimes contentious nature of families' previous interactions with court staff, some stakeholders leveraged consultants and community organizations to facilitate these activities, such as by organizing family dinners, holding family focus groups, or providing information. Jurisdictions might consider partnering with community organizations to build needed expertise and alternative perspectives.

What Advice Did Sites Have for Stakeholders Considering Engaging Youth and Families?

During the evaluation, stakeholders offered insights on strategies they believed fostered success and mitigated challenges. Those insights are listed in figure 2 below.

FIGURE 2

Stakeholder Insights on Strategies for Engaging Youth and Families



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Note

¹ Quotes from stakeholders throughout this brief are drawn from interviews or open-ended comments from surveys of stakeholders conducted by the evaluation team, August 2014 to August 2018.

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About the Author

Megan Hague Angus is a researcher at Mathematica who specializes in evaluating federal, state, and local programs involving children, youth, and families. A qualitative researcher conducting evaluations for over 17 years, she has expertise in implementation research, qualitative data collection and analysis, and programmatic and evaluation technical assistance. She currently oversees the evaluation of two child care projects in Detroit, both of which support and foster the learning and social emotional needs of families raising young children.

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