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# Identifying, Engaging, and Empowering Families: A Charge for Juvenile Justice Agencies

February 2016

**Ryan Shanahan**, Research Director, *Center on Youth Justice,*  
*Vera Institute of Justice*

**Margaret diZerega**, Project Director, *Center on Sentencing and*  
*Corrections, Vera Institute of Justice*



**Cover Art:**

*Families and supportive adults can have a positive impact on young people's lives. Identifying and engaging family and community members to help juveniles throughout all stages of the juvenile justice system can improve youth's mental health, reduce behavioral problems, provide motivation, and lower the rate of recidivism. The cover art represents the positive growth and development of juveniles who have the benefit of access to an active support system as they move through the juvenile justice system.*

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# Introduction

Family involvement is an essential element at all points of the juvenile justice system. From arrest to probation, placement, and reentry, families should be respected as partners by the justice system and involved in decisions about their children. For youth in the juvenile justice system, family is best defined broadly to include biological family members, extended and chosen family (including godparents and foster siblings), and other important people such as mentors, teachers, and coaches. Research on the role of family involvement is growing and reflects what juvenile justice staff know through their own experience—youth with strong and diverse support systems have better outcomes.

This white paper reviews the literature exploring the relationship between family contact and short- and long-term outcomes for youth in the juvenile justice system, and identifies ways that agencies from police through reentry staff can better engage families in ways that promote both personal contact and active involvement in case assessment, planning, and management.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> *This paper builds on Joan Pennell, Carol Shapiro, and Carol Spigner, Safety, Fairness, Stability: Repositioning Juvenile Justice and Child Welfare to Engage Families and Communities (Washington, DC: Georgetown University Center for Juvenile Justice Reform, 2011).*

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## Experience from the Field

At the Vera Institute of Justice (Vera), the Family Justice Program offers training, technical assistance, and research capacity to help government agencies and their partners capitalize on the resources inherent in families and social networks. Organizations equipped with this knowledge have the opportunity to implement policies, methods, and tools that support the preservation of positive relationships and enhance results post-release. Central to the Family Justice Program's approach is the valuing of staff expertise, as well as that of people involved in the justice system and their families.

Over the past several years, Vera completed two major family engagement initiatives that led to learning for the larger juvenile justice field. In partnership with the Ohio Department of Youth Services (DYS), Vera helped the state develop family engagement policies and implement new practices throughout its juvenile correctional facilities—including the use of the Juvenile Relational Inquiry Tool (JRIT) by line staff. The JRIT, a user-friendly tool for

identifying social support, is discussed in more detail below. The work in Ohio culminated in a research brief on the benefits of family involvement for safety and education and generated interest from the field about how DYS implemented the new policies and practices (Villalobos Agudelo, 2013). Building on the lessons learned in Ohio, Vera embarked on a second major juvenile justice initiative to develop national standards on family engagement for use by juvenile correctional facilities and state agency leaders. This effort was conducted in partnership with the Performance-based Standards Learning Institute, and the family engagement standards that resulted are now being used to guide decision-making at facilities in 27 states (PbS-Li, 2014).

The initiatives that Vera led in Kentucky, New York, Ohio, Virginia, Washington, DC, and other places have reinforced for the authors the importance of family engagement in juvenile justice settings. This work provides the foundation for this paper.



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# Literature Review

Families are often blamed for young people's juvenile justice system involvement or delinquent behavior. These negative stereotypes and perceptions about families, however, ignore that families can also play other, more positive roles in young people's lives and increase their chances of success. Research on the positive impact families can have for young people dates back to the 1970s. Holt and Miller (1972) found that supportive family contact during incarceration was associated with improved behavior in prison and better parole outcomes for youth in California. A study from 1977 found that a family-systems approach not only reduced recidivism rates for justice-involved youth, compared to other models of treatment, but also reduced the rates of siblings' involvement in the justice system (Klein et al., 1977).

Contemporary research dives deeper into the types of family relationships and contact that facilitate the best outcomes. The Minnesota Department of Correction, in studying incarcerated adults, explored the connection between visits and recidivism and found that people who had more visits had lower rates of recidivism (Duwe & Clark, 2011). More importantly, the people who were least likely to recidivate had a variety of people visit them. The results showed that "the number of individual visitors had a significant effect, reducing the risk of reconviction by 3 percent for each additional visitor" (Duwe & Clark, 2011, p. 12).

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*Youth development theory stresses that maintaining social ties throughout incarceration is even more vital for youth than for adults.*

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Youth development theory stresses that maintaining social ties throughout incarceration is even more vital for youth than for adults. Incarceration separates adolescents from their home during a period of development when their sense of well-being and their coping skills are still highly influenced by parents and other family members (Dmitrieva et al., 2012). When placed in an adverse setting, such as a correctional institution, young people frequently have much more difficulty regulating their

moods and behaviors (Spear, 2000). This transitional period at the beginning of a youth's incarceration is characterized by "concurrent stressors" such as isolation and adjustment to a restrictive environment, which can intensify preexisting emotional and behavioral problems (Cicchetti & Rogosch, 2002). For young people with mental health problems, the conditions of confinement and its associated stressors diminish their ability to preserve their identity and self-esteem (Flanagan, 1981; MacKenzie & Goodstein, 1985). Given the research on adolescent development, the rupturing of formative social relationships, particularly with family, is of great concern for incarcerated youth (Biggam & Power, 2002).

Family support has also been found to be a moderator against the detrimental effects of negative or stressful events (Cohen & Willis, 1985). For example, youth who receive frequent visits from parents throughout their confinement show a more rapid reduction in depression symptoms than their peers who receive fewer visits (Monahan et al., 2011). There is evidence to suggest that incarcerated youth who get frequent visits get better grades and have fewer violent incidents while in placement (Villalobos Agudelo, 2013). As was demonstrated for adult offenders by Duwe & Clark above, visits are also valuable in reducing recidivism for juveniles (Osgood et al., 2005). Parental visits during incarceration are identified as having protective effects regardless of the quality of the parent-adolescent relationship (Monahan et al., 2011). Further, establishing family contact during the first few months is critical because of the significant impact it can have on young people's mental health during incarceration and upon release.

Given the essential role that family plays in youth development, it is crucial to preserve familial relationships. A 2013 National Research Council (NRC) report cited evidence that a relationship with a parent or other adult figure can have a positive impact on an adolescent, serving as a protective buffer against external influences and the negative effects that might result from such interactions. The powerful influence of family has

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been found to produce positive outcomes for youth in confinement or community-based settings. As the NRC report notes, even in cases where parents may have played a role in adversely influencing a young person toward anti-social behavior, any youth development approach that aims to produce lasting change must include thorough engagement with families (National Research Council, 2013).

Despite this mandate for family inclusion, state juvenile justice systems are not yet fully informed of the way forward. The NRC report confirmed the necessity of parental involvement but called it a “critical, unmet challenge,” noting that “additional research regarding the processes of family involvement in juvenile justice and methods for successfully involving parents in these processes is urgently needed” (National Research Council, 2013, p. 159).

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# Envisioning a Family-Focused Juvenile Justice Field

The research is clear on the benefits of keeping youth connected to their families. What has been less clear to the field is what steps juvenile justice professionals can take to foster the connection between young people and their families and join with families in true partnership. This section explores the ways that agencies can harness the power of the supportive people in youth's lives. We assert a three-part model for full family partnership—rooted in the broader definition of family noted above—that focuses on identification, engagement, and empowerment. This section describes each part of the model and provides examples of the ways that the model can be operationalized across the juvenile justice system from arrest to reentry—the continuum through which youth and family experience the system. It is through the use of this holistic lens that we can improve how juvenile justice systems partner with families.

## Identification

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The first step in creating a family-focused environment in any agency is identifying the family and social support available to young people. Youth should be initially assessed for the strength and diversity of their support system and this assessment should be revisited as they move through the system. The Juvenile Relational Inquiry Tool (JRIT) is one way to help staff in various parts of the system use open-ended, nonjudgmental questions to learn more about both the strengths and the gaps in young people's support systems (Shanahan & Villalobos Agudelo, 2012).

When gaps exist and a young person's support system needs to be bolstered, staff should be diligent about identifying other family members, including use of Family Finding technology (Louisell, 2008). Family Finding identifies relatives who may be able to play a supportive role in the youth's life. Using search engines to locate and engage those who are disconnected from the youth, Family Finding identifies those relatives and, as appropriate, connects them with the youth. While better known for helping youth in the child welfare system create supportive and sometimes permanent relationships, including options for adoption, this approach is equally important for youth in the juvenile justice system (Family Connections Hawai'i, 2012). For example, having a housing plan in place can help some youth exit a juvenile facility more quickly. Courts, probation and parole officers, and aftercare workers can use technology like Family Finding when a young person needs a housing resource. These connections, however, should not be viewed only as potential placements. The relatives found can also be supportive of the youth in other ways, even if they are not able to provide a place for the youth to live.

Technology does not come without costs, and agencies are being creative in finding ways to cover related expenses. In Ohio, the juvenile parole office partnered with the state's child welfare agency to share the cost of Family Finding as a way to develop supportive, pro-social relationships for youth involved with the Ohio Department of Youth Services or with both agencies. These relationships, nurtured and sustained over time, help to form a supportive network of pro-social adults for youth when they are no longer receiving the supervision, guidance, services, and supports of their parole officers (Ohio Department of Youth Services, 2011).

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## Engagement

Once family members are identified, agencies should be welcoming. No matter if it is a probation or parole office or a facility visiting area, the climate should reflect the agency's respect for families.

The New York City Department of Probation (DOP) recently opened Neighborhood Opportunity Network offices (NeONS), which aim “to improve probation clients’ outcomes and the culture of DOP by decentralizing probation supervision in communities with a high concentration of individuals on probation, connecting probation clients to services and opportunities in the communities in which they live, and building supportive relations between DOP and local communities” (McGarry et al., 2014). The offices, which serve adults and juveniles, are designed not to just be a place to report but a center for the community to access resources—which could be helpful information or the free use of computers and printers for résumés. The offices, one of which won a design award, also create a family-friendly environment

### Family Engagement Standards

According to the Juvenile Detention Alternatives Initiative’s (JDAI) 2014 update of the Juvenile Detention Facility Assessment, “success in the community is often linked to supportive relationships that youth have with family and others” (Annie E. Casey Foundation, 2014a). The new JDAI access standards, which provide an easy-to-use checklist for facilities to assess themselves, highlight the need to:

- promote family engagement by eliminating or decreasing limitations for family mail, telephone correspondence, and visitation;
- ease and simplify the process for families to engage with youth; and
- ensure staff are well trained on the importance of family engagement for justice-involved youth.

and reflect a mandate for probation officers to engage the family of the youth under supervision with respect and a strength-based perspective.

Research suggests that youth who remain in the community generally have better outcomes after arrest, but when that is not possible and a young person must be placed in a detention center or a placement facility, family engagement is imperative. While family engagement is essential throughout the juvenile justice system continuum, placement poses a significant challenge, especially in states with facilities that are far from home. Though family engagement may look different across facilities, there are common standards that can be put in place to ensure that families are involved: use the broadest definition of families that includes all supportive people, and allow these supportive individuals as much access to youth as possible through both informal contact—visits, phone calls, and letters—and formal contact, including facility-run meetings on a youth’s progress and parent-teacher conferences.

**Informal contact.** Agencies and facilities should review their policies to include the broadest definition of family possible to reflect all of the positive people who can be in contact with the young person and part of their programs. As mentioned earlier, people with a diverse set of visitors do best. Historically, the juvenile justice system has limited the type and number of people who can support youth during their incarceration through narrow contact policies. Often, facility visitation policies prohibit any visitors outside of immediate family and, in some facilities, even siblings are not allowed to visit. Across the country states are beginning to question the logic and intention behind such policies—often justified as a protective precaution for young people—and to open their visitation beyond parents and immediate family. California was one of the first states to encourage supportive nonfamily members to visit. As reported on their website, “anyone listed on a youth’s visitors list who does not pose a threat to the safety and/or security of the visiting program can visit” (California Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation). Other states allow exceptions to rules, but this can serve as an unintended roadblock for supportive people or family members who do not know to ask. Alternatively, California’s approach, which sets the standard broadly

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for visitation, encourages supportive people and communicates clearly the importance of their involvement.

The times and rules around visitation also communicate the importance a system places on family involvement. In places like Indiana, Oregon, Vermont, and Wisconsin, families are allowed to visit every day. Other states continue to have limiting policies but allow families to schedule special visits to accommodate people who may not be able to visit on regular visitation days. The visiting approval process is also important—agencies are now reviewing their policies to reduce the amount of time it takes to approve visitors and limiting the intrusive security screenings that take place at the facility. The Juvenile Detention Alternatives Initiative created “family access” standards for detention facilities which can help hold facilities accountable, ensure family contact is not tied to discipline, and create consistency across locations (see side bar; Annie E. Casey Foundation, 2014a).

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When in-person contact is not possible, states are finding success by using a mix of technology and in-person visits, at no cost to families, to promote participation. Technology can allow for parental involvement in meetings—monthly support or treatment teams, educational conferences, and medical consultations. Field staff can be equipped with laptops to connect family, as well as other supportive individuals (e.g., neighbors, school officials, and potential employers), with youth in placement as a way to support treatment, but also to prepare them for reentry. The use of technology should not replace in-person contact and should be at no cost to the family. States working to strike the right balance between video and in-person contact include Indiana, Ohio, and Virginia.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> For more information on Indiana, see: <http://www.in.gov/idoc/dys/2385.htm>; Ohio, see: H. J. Reed, *Testimony of Ohio Department of Youth Services Director before Subcommittee on Transportation (2015)*; and Virginia, see: [http://www.djj.virginia.gov/pdf/Admin/Newsletter\\_01032014.pdf](http://www.djj.virginia.gov/pdf/Admin/Newsletter_01032014.pdf).

In between visits, phone calls are a convenient way to keep young people connected to their support system. States across the country are also increasing the amount of contact youth can have between visits, offering free and more frequent phone calls and letters, as well as offering Skype and other types of video conferencing with family members.

For young people with children of their own, a stay in a placement facility can pose additional challenges, but it can also afford opportunities. In detention and long-term placement facilities alike, the Just Beginning Program (formerly known as the Baby Elmo Program) of the Youth Law Center ensures that youth who are parents have productive contact with their children and provides parenting education for incarcerated teens through the use of media and experiential learning to develop and strengthen the relationship between young parents and their babies. Each educational session, which is taught by a corrections staff member, is followed by a visit between the incarcerated teen parent and his or her child. One incarcerated youth describes the impact of the program on his relationship with his daughter this way:

Before [the Baby Elmo Program], I was only able to see my daughter the last Saturday of each month for one hour. The day of my first visit in the new Baby Elmo Room, I was scared. Truthfully, it felt like I didn't know my daughter because it had been five months since I last saw her. She didn't take to me for the first thirty minutes of the visit, and this made me feel bad because I had waited so long to see her. Now I see her every Saturday through the Baby Elmo program, and our relationship is good. She knows her daddy! Before I even see her I can hear her saying, “Daddy!” all the way down the hallway, and when she sees me she gets that surprised look on her face and that big smile. I even keep a journal now. It's not about me—it's about her. I write in it every time I think about her. This program means a lot to me because it's my opportunity to have my daughter experience how much I love her. A phone call could not do this, but seeing her does (Vera Institute of Justice, 2012).

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**Formal contact.** Family team meetings are one way that agencies can engage families in the formal processing and treatment of young people. Agencies can use family team meetings in place of the more common treatment team meetings or multidisciplinary team meetings—times, usually monthly, when staff from across the agency come together to discuss youth progress and make decisions about treatment and education. Involving families at these crucial decision-making points opens the door to better identify the services and resources a family might need in the community—either in conjunction with the young person’s time in a facility or when the young person returns to the home—and for staff to make an appropriate referral (Annie E. Casey Foundation, 2013). Referrals for services can also help youth connect with agencies beyond the walls of a juvenile justice facility. Juvenile justice agencies can use family team meetings to connect families to pre-identified vendors and organizations in the community that provide treatment, housing, employment, education, and other supportive services. It can be a source of relief for young people if they know their family’s needs are being met and a source of motivation when family members have the resources to meet their own needs in preparation for the return home of their child.

Connecting with families as a support can also be a way to build the rapport and trust needed for them to be more engaged with system actors. Ohio parole officers have access in the field to the Ohio Benefit Bank, an online system for applying for public benefits such as federal student aid, food stamps, cash assistance, Medicaid and Medicare, and assistance with utility bills. Each regional parole office is a registered site, and officers are trained in navigating the system and enrolling families. DYS reports that it expects that this “enhanced engagement of the family will strengthen their relationship with the Juvenile Probation Officers and other DYS staff, decreasing the level of distrust that often exists” with families (Ohio Department of Youth Services, 2011).

In 2013, the Washington, DC, Department of Youth Rehabilitation Services hired a family advocate who had personal experience with a loved one in the justice system to internally push processes for and initiate conversations about ways to reduce the barriers to families visiting. The agency now provides free food and snacks at visits and continues to offer families free transportation to its

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facilities, flexible hours to visit, and staff who are available to answer questions. Transportation has been crucial to supporting family engagement in Texas and Ohio and remains one of the number one factors youth and families have identified in Vera’s work as impeding their ability to visit. In Texas, the agency provides a bus for families to participate in parent-teacher conferences. In Ohio, juvenile justice leaders partnered with churches to provide buses that rotate serving the three facilities each month through the CLOSE to Home Project (Connecting Loved Ones Sooner Than Expected).

In Indiana, Missouri, New Hampshire, and Wisconsin, staff formally engage families by providing tours of the facility (at times led by the young people). The tours help reduce family members’ anxiety about the facility environment and provide them an opportunity to ask questions about food, programming, and residential facilities. This not only engages the family but also builds the relationship between staff and families.

Some states are reconsidering the practice of charging families child support for a young person’s incarceration. Though the charges may be nominal, they can have a significant financial impact on the family, create animosity, and place an additional barrier to full family engagement.

## Empowerment

Parents are partners with correctional staff, educators, and treatment providers in their child’s rehabilitation and are encouraged and assisted to actively participate in the design and implementation of their child’s treatment, from intake to discharge (Garza, 2012).

In 2007, parents, youth, advocacy groups, and juvenile justice agency staff in Texas worked together to create the Texas Juvenile Justice Department Parents’ Bill of



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Rights, quoted above. Texas was one of the first states to develop a Parents' Bill of Rights. The effort was led by Rebecca Garza, the family liaison coordinator, and set the tone for empowering families. The powerful language chosen, such as "actively participate in the design and implementation of their child's treatment," signals to parents and family members that their loved one's arrest does not equate to their giving up power or rights. Now California, Indiana, and Washington, DC, use similar bills of rights to communicate a family's right to be active in their loved one's education, treatment, and programming.

What would systems look like if juvenile justice agencies were mandated to assist families so they could actively participate in their child's placement? Justice for Families is a national alliance of local organizations founded and run by parents and families whose children have experienced the juvenile justice system. Justice for Families provided training and support for families to advocate for change with their local juvenile justice agency. In 2012, Justice for Families published *Families Unlocking Futures: Solutions to the Crisis in Juvenile Justice*, a report based on surveys of more than 1,000 family members and two dozen focus groups of families conducted in more than a dozen cities across the country and centered on low-income families and families of color in the research design and analysis. The report recommends that agencies adopt Parents' Bills of Rights that are developed by, or in partnership with, family councils. Family councils are comprised of family members of youth currently or formerly involved with an agency. Family councils can be engaged in discussions on improvements to agency policies and practices that impact youth and families. Members can also provide peer support for families who are new to the juvenile justice system and who are looking for help navigating the system (Arya, 2012).

Family council members can also be called on for roundtable discussions with staff or incorporated into staff training. Introducing new staff to family engagement in their orientation and training through panels of parents or family members presented as experts not only is a strong training approach, but also a strong statement about the value of family input. These panels can provide family members the opportunity to relay their experiences with

the system and discuss successful ways they partner with staff.

As the Texas Parents' Bill of Rights demands, when a young person is involved with the justice system, family members should be consulted at various decision-making points. Family impact statements, modeled after victim impact statements, can be used in disposition to include families in the decisions being made about their loved one. Family impact statements allow judges to consider the effects on family members in sentencing, particularly with regard to the facility's proximity to them (Osborne Association, 2012).

If a young person must be committed, staff and agency leaders can empower families by orienting them to the process and the system through family guidebooks and orientation manuals that include a welcoming letter from the facility superintendent/director and the team of people who will be working with their child. The information should be clear and concise and in the family's first language. It is important that parents understand the ways in which they can stay involved with their children and support them in areas that might be difficult. For example, parents can help motivate young people to participate in programming and follow facility rules. Staff in one of Indiana's state juvenile facilities must contact parents after each use of force—families can ask the staff questions about the incident and talk with their child about their behavior. As a result of this change in facility practice, use-of-force incidents have declined (Harshbarger, 2014). Families should also be included in fun events—sporting events, church services, performances, and graduations are great times to invite families into facilities to celebrate and foster family connections.

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*Families can motivate youth when they are well-informed about the youth's progress.*

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Families can motivate youth when they are well-informed about the youth's progress. In many short- and long-term facilities, staff include family members in monthly or bi-weekly meetings to monitor a young person's progress in education and programs. These monthly progress meetings are an important time to engage families by

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including them in the decision-making process. As noted above in the engagement section, we suggest re-imagining treatment team meetings and multidisciplinary team meetings as family team meetings—drawing on the successes in child welfare. Family team meetings, also noted above, develop a formal way to partner with families in developing juvenile justice dispositional or service and treatment recommendations. A seemingly small shift in practice can support a large shift in culture with positive implications for youth outcomes. The fields of behavioral health and child welfare find that youth have better outcomes when these types of meetings are utilized as part of regular case practice and as a means of providing a meaningful family role in the decision-making process (Northern California Training Academy, 2008; Annie E. Casey Foundation, 2014b).

The transition home can be challenging for youth and families. To ease the transition, Kentucky’s Department of Juvenile Justice instituted weekend furlough programs where youth go home to their families as part of the youth’s preparation for reentry. Staff help the youth prepare before the visit and debrief the experience with them when they return to the facility. The University of Cincinnati recently finished piloting a new component of their Effective Practices in Community Supervision

(EPICS) tools—training parole/aftercare workers to coach parents on cognitive behavioral therapy (CBT) techniques to practice with their loved ones when they return from a period of incarceration. By providing this version of the CBT curriculum (Family EPICS) to parents, parole officers help families reinforce the skills youth learned at the facility and help parents retain their role as authority figures in their children’s lives (Reed, 2012).

Families can also be empowered to work on legislation and policies that impact their children and communities. In New York, family members worked with policymakers to pass “Close to Home” legislation. Passed in April 2012, Close to Home requires youth adjudicated delinquent placed in nonsecure settings to be placed with the New York City Administration for Children Services rather than be sent into the custody of the state agency, where they previously would have been housed in a facility two to six hours away from the city. The initiative was designed to keep youth close to their home communities, minimize separation from their families, promote community and family involvement, and provide effective reintegration services. The legislation aimed to improve outcomes for youth, maintain public safety, and reduce both recidivism and racial and ethnic disparities.



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## Summary

This paper lays out a model for family engagement across the continuum of a young person's involvement in the juvenile justice system. In order for this model to take root and succeed, there needs to be a strong, clear, and consistent message from juvenile justice agency leaders about the importance of family. Successful leaders understand that they are only as good as the people who surround them. Developing the right culture requires hiring and rewarding staff who demonstrate a talent for engaging youth and families. From middle managers to line staff, and receptionists to cooks, a family-focused culture requires a team effort. Managers need to embody the actions and practices that reflect the vision of the agency, as they must ensure that staff have the support they need to meaningfully engage families as equal partners. Line staff are often the first people that families interact with and are also the ones young people interact with the most, making them the cornerstone to developing a welcoming environment and a respectful, strength-based approach to engaging family members. This will only happen if line staff receive the training and support needed to effectively partner with families.

Every staff member has a role to play in cultivating a family-focused culture, even those who do not directly interact with families because of their position. Staff working in the kitchen or running recreational activities may be the individuals who can help determine through casual conversations which family members are positive, pro-social influences, understand how a youth's grandparent may show support for an educational goal, or help a young woman identify the adults outside her household who can help her get settled once she returns home.

Juvenile justice agencies can measure the changes they are making with regard to family partnerships and share that information with staff and stakeholders—including family and family councils. As mentioned earlier, Vera partnered with the Performance-based Standards Learning Institute (PbS) to develop family engagement standards for juvenile justice agencies. This innovative approach uses surveys and administrative data to capture the perceptions of youth, families, and staff on conditions, safety, services, staff-youth relationships, contact with family, and preparedness for reentry. Built into PbS is a roadmap to help facilities improve their levels of family engagement through concrete steps demonstrated to be effective at other agencies. This is the first wide-scale use of ongoing family surveys to inform agency quality assurance measures and reforms. It is an important first step to capturing data on family partnership and, because it is housed within PbS, the family measures are directly connected to other facility measures such as those related to safety, security, health, and programming. Many states are already reporting on family engagement through PbS. The next step will be to have this information collected nationwide both to learn more about how to better increase family engagement and to support more facilities in taking the concept of family engagement and putting it into practice. Additionally, national data would bolster the research base on the impact of family partnerships. As seen in the literature review, when family measures are connected with other outcomes, such as safety and education, juvenile justice agencies have a more complete understanding of the ways that family partnerships can positively impact youth outcomes and thereby improve public safety.

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## Future Directions

This white paper makes the case that current momentum to develop true family partnerships as a way of benefitting young people involved in the juvenile justice system should not be a passing trend. The connection between family and shorter lengths of stay in detention; better educational, mental health, and safety outcomes in placement; and lower rates of recidivism supports what juvenile justice staff intuitively know—children do better, and the work of juvenile justice systems is easier, when families are identified, engaged, and empowered. It is the responsibility of juvenile justice agencies to identify supportive people in the lives of youth in their care—regardless of where the young person is within the juvenile justice system—and, whenever possible, maintain or establish those connections throughout the young person’s time with the agency. The momentum to do so nationally is growing, and a wonderful opportunity exists for federal agencies that are working with children in the juvenile justice system and their families to lead the charge (Georgetown University Center for Juvenile Justice Reform, 2011).

Family engagement is not a tool to be filled out or a box to check. True partnership with family members, broadly defined to include a diverse array of supportive adults, requires breaking down the walls between the community and the agency. Full family partnership means agency transparency—sharing information, inviting feedback on and input into decision-making, and thinking at every stage of the justice system about the impact decisions have on families and how their engagement can reduce the potentially negative impact of that system involvement. The Vera Institute of Justice believes that families are central to the broader goals of reducing the number of youth in facilities and increasing their success after release. We see a future of juvenile justice where the young people and families most impacted by the justice system are treated as true partners and members of the juvenile justice team—helping to lead the reform efforts that will benefit both them and their children.

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**Center for Juvenile Justice Reform**  
McCourt School of Public Policy  
Georgetown University  
Box 571444  
3300 Whitehaven Street, NW, Suite 5000  
Washington, D.C. 20057

<http://cjjr.georgetown.edu>  
[jjreform@georgetown.edu](mailto:jjreform@georgetown.edu)

