

FAMILY ENGAGEMENT IN THE JUVENILE JUSTICE SYSTEM

Juvenile Justice Factsheet 5

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Parental and family engagement by the juvenile justice system is proven to be effective for better youth outcomes. Last year, a National Academy of Sciences (NAS) 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 negative influences. Other research has shown that family visitation for youth is associated with better behavior and improved academic performance (Villalobos Agudelo, 2013). And it is clear that most families want to play a bigger role: in a survey of family members, 86 percent said they wanted to be more involved in their children's treatment while they were incarcerated (Justice for Families, 2012).

family support: an underutilized resource

While momentum is growing among state juvenile justice systems that are embracing families and recognizing that family engagement is required for positive youth outcomes, more work remains to be done. The NAS 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." Juvenile justice professionals may not see evidence that families want to be involved given the distance families have to travel to facilities, the sometimes narrow definition of family that limits who can visit, or the fact that family meetings may be scheduled during working hours. Incorporating family involvement into all justice systems is also integral to helping to break cycles of incarceration given that children of incarcerated parents are more likely to eventually be incarcerated themselves. Fortunately, there are promising practices and tools that jurisdictions can employ to increase the opportunities for families to be involved in their youth's care.

strategies to identify and engage families

Juvenile justice systems are making strides to better identify and engage family members and other people who support youth. Many of these efforts mirror parent engagement activities in school settings. For example, facilities can hold orientation sessions or tours for families, or make sure parents receive report cards and adequate transportation to participate in parent-teacher conferences. Other strategies, like including families (in-person or by telephone) in regular treatment meetings and counseling sessions, help to increase families' knowledge and skills in supporting their loved one's treatment and reentry plans in the facility and upon returning home. Here are some specific examples that juvenile justice systems have implemented.

>In several California juvenile detention facilities, youth who are parents participate in the Baby Elmo parenting program. Led by facility staff, youth build skills as new parents and have the opportunity to apply what they've learned through special visits with their children.

>The District of Columbia Department of Youth Rehabilitation Services created a family coordinator staff position, which brings in the expertise of family members whose children have been in the juvenile justice system to help families navigate the system and stay better connected to their loved ones.

>From 2010 to 2013, the Ohio Department of Youth Services developed family engagement policies and implemented new practices from its juvenile correctional facilities to the parole division. Through technical assistance by Vera, facilities now include families in monthly treatment meetings, offer expanded visiting hours to more kinds of relatives, and offer parenting programs to incarcerated youth who are parents. Parole officers bring laptops into homes to offer video visitation and use a training program that helps them to coach parents around the transition of their child into the home and to introduce parents to cognitive behavioral interventions.

raising the bar with national standards

It is critical that all juvenile facilities track the degree to which they engage families. The success of the following initiative shows the importance of establishing standards for family engagement:

>The Performance-based Standards Learning Institute (PbS-Li), an initiative of the Council of Juvenile Correctional Administrators, provides national standards for a number of topics central to effective juvenile justice facilities, including mental health and reintegration. Recognizing the important role of families in youth's success, PbS-Li, in partnership with Vera, worked with juvenile justice agencies, family advocates, researchers, and others in 2012 to develop standards on family engagement for use by juvenile correctional facilities and state agency leaders nationwide. The family engagement standards—which require facilities to survey families, youth, and staff—can now be used to guide decision making at facilities in 27 states.

>Based on feedback from their PbS reports, Indiana's Division of Youth Services decided to revise its visitation policy, expanding visiting hours to nearly any time a family member can get to the facility and lifting all restrictions on the number of visits allowed. As a result, one facility doubled its normal rate of visitation and has seen improved behavior by young people in the facility.

In the 27 states currently reporting on these standards, policymakers can begin asking how states are meeting the family engagement standards and what their plans are for improvement. Further research and expansion of such standards can bring tools for improving family engagement to all states and juvenile facilities.

FOR MORE INFORMATION

The Vera Institute of Justice is an independent nonprofit organization that combines research, demonstration projects, and technical assistance to help leaders in government and civil society improve the systems people rely on for justice and safety. Vera's Family Justice Program provides training, technical assistance, and research to help community-based organizations and government agencies—such as corrections, parole and probation, and juvenile justice entities—adapt their policies and practices to be strength based and family focused.