FAMILY & YOUTH AS PARTNERS
Best Practice & Operational Strategies

Justice for Families (J4F) is a national network of family leaders, impacted by the justice system, working to end mass criminalization, particularly of youth and in communities of color. J4F staff and volunteers work to challenge and address systemic barriers in the juvenile justice system that impede meaningful engagement of young people and their families at the individual case level and in broader system reform efforts.

To develop sustainable solutions to the issues identified in our research, Justice For Families partnered with the Annie E. Casey Foundation’s Juvenile Detention Alternatives Initiative (JDAI). Families, young people, foundation staff and system stakeholders from JDAI sites are now working together to develop tools and strategies that will help systems embrace and operationalize the core concepts of meaningful family and youth engagement.

**FUNDAMENTAL CONCEPTS OF FAMILY & YOUTH PARTNERSHIPS**

Family advocacy experts and JDAI define family engagement as “a meaningful partnership with families and youth at every level of the agency and system.” It’s important to note that meaningful engagement happens when families are truly valued, and when they are appreciated as experts and critical stakeholders in the shaping of positive outcomes. This is not limited to families as experts on their own children and the benefits to engaging them at the individual case-level; it also includes drawing on the experiences and expertise of families throughout all the stages of system reform.

**Family Engagement is a Mindset**

- Family engagement begins with a fundamental belief that all families care for their children, have strengths that can be built upon, and can be engaged and empowered.
- Family engagement is not about one single policy or practice or program, rather it lives in the culture of an organization and its evidence is seen in how families are treated and partnered with at a systemic level.

**Define Family Broadly**

- Narrow, traditional definitions of who “family” is will seriously undermine the ability of systems to achieve the best possible results for the youth they serve.
• Partnering with families cannot be limited to just parents and legal guardians. Instead, the definition of family should remain broad. This can include siblings, grandparents, uncles, aunts, and cousins.
• An inclusive definition of family also embraces those connected by biology, marriage, adoption, and can even include people that have such significant shared histories and experiences that they are considered to be family.
• It is not the role of the system to define who a family is. Families and especially youth should be given the opportunity to define this for themselves.

Value Culture & Context

• Every youth that comes to the attention of the juvenile justice system brings along with them a complex web of experiences and stories. Many of these stories sit within a rich familial and communal culture.
• System stakeholders will achieve better outcomes if their first instinct and motivation is to learn and understand.
• If done correctly and authentically, this approach can help to mitigate both implicit and explicit bias, which sometimes comes in the forms of judgment and making assumptions.

Self-Examination & Patience are Key

• True collaboration and partnership requires mutual trust and respect.
• Developing trust and respect among families that may come from different social, economic, racial, and ethnic backgrounds and cultures requires a deep level of openness for self-examination and exploration.
• We must be open to accepting that we naturally judge others that are different from us, but that a genuine interest in finding common ground is at the heart of building trusting and respectful relationships.
• Effective family engagement efforts are mindful of existing power dynamics and are intentional about sharing power and authority. Remember that true partnerships take time to build, and will require patience and perseverance.

FRAMEWORK & GUIDELINES

The following guidelines were created to help sites assess the current policies and practices regarding family and youth engagement and develop a plan designed to create a continuum of engagement opportunities.

1. Develop a structure to manage, support, maintain and provide accountability for family engagement work.
• Identify lead staff (preferably a family member or former system-involved youth)
• Establish a work group to manage process, ensure that families and youth are represented on this workgroup
• Establish governance structure, accountability mechanisms, and budget
• Develop initial shared vision, goals, desired outcomes and timelines

2. Assess current status of family and youth engagement.
   • Select assessment tool (see Resource section below)
   • Adapt or enhance tool to address local strengths, challenges, issues, demographics, culture
   • Ensure that tool is comprehensive – and includes key questions related to:
     o Mission & Vision
     o Policy & Financing Decisions
     o Practice Model
     o Cross-System Issues
     o Workforce Development
     o Service Delivery
     o Youth outcomes & data
   • Complete assessment

3. Listen to families & youth to determine changes needed.
   • Identify existing family and youth advocacy, support & stakeholder organizations from which to solicit feedback and input
   • Develop a strategy to reach out to families and youth not currently connected to existing organizations
   • Conduct surveys and hold focus groups to obtain family and youth feedback and input
   • Compile and organize input to identify themes and recommendations

4. Develop a broad vision for meaningful youth & family engagement.
   • Review each of the seven areas in the Systems Framework (below) and draft a statement regarding role of family and youth engagement in each area:
     o Mission & Vision
     o Policy & Financing Decisions
     o Practice Model
     o Cross-System Issues
     o Workforce Development
     o Service Delivery
     o Youth outcomes & data

5. Develop a strategic plan for adopting the changes.
• Create strategic plan, ensuring that it addresses all seven areas in the systems framework
• Ensure that plan provides for a continuum of engagement opportunities for families and youth
• Ensure that the plan includes concrete and specific family and youth engagement strategies – utilize existing documents and examples of promising practices to develop these strategies (see Resource section below)
• Identify staffing and funding resources necessary to carry out plan
• Inventory federal, state, local public and private funding sources that can be tapped to support implementation of the plan

6. Implement the plan.
• Provide workforce development, training and coaching opportunities for staff at all levels
• Provide leadership development training, coaching and support for family and youth
• Provide information and training to the agency Board of Directors or other governing bodies regarding the family and youth engagement plan and their role in supporting the ongoing implementation of the plan
• Develop mechanisms to communicate the vision, values and strategies for family and youth engagement throughout the organization, across multiple youth-serving systems and to external stakeholders, including youth and families within the community
• Identify or develop a mechanism for tracking implementation of the plan

7. Institute an on-going continuous quality improvement (CQI) process.
• Determine performance measures and benchmarks
• Institute a mechanism to receive and utilize family and youth feedback on a regular basis
• Ensure that each staff person’s (including leadership) performance evaluation contains measures related to supporting effective family and youth engagement
• Develop mechanism for tracking family and youth outcomes
• Conduct periodic assessments
• Modify and update strategic plan at regular intervals to incorporate lessons learned from ongoing CQI efforts
• Report outcomes to families and youth (through networks of existing organizations as identified in Guideline Area #3) to policy-makers, funders and the public
OPERATIONAL RECOMMENDATIONS

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

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

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

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

“Partnering For Success” Series
• Offer services at hours that correspond with the schedules of working families

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

And Beyond
• Provide families with peer support/family partners who can help them navigate unfamiliar school, arrest, court, probation, and placement rules
• Issue standards on the fair treatment of families with juvenile justice systems
• Involve families in all important decision making points within school disciplinary and youth justice systems.
• Governments should work with the private sector, philanthropists and others to support parent/family advocacy organizations

RESOURCES
“Family & Youth Engagement, Site Readiness Assessment” and the “System Assessment through a Family Engagement Lens” from the “Partnering For Success Series”. Information about the “Site Readiness and System Assessment” can be obtained by contacting Grace Bauer-Lubow at Justice For Families.

“Focus on Youth and Families; A Guide for Conducting Focus Groups with Youth and Families Impacted by the Juvenile Justice System”

“Family Comes First”, Campaign for Youth Justice
Executive summary and information on how to obtain full report can be found here:

To find out more about these materials, staff trainings and our research, please visit our website at www.justice4families.org or contact Grace Bauer-Lubow, Executive Director, at grace@justice4families.org.