

Stephanie Shaw:

Welcome everyone to our webinar called Youth and Family Partnership in Juvenile Justice Systems Reform: Building a Strategy, Sharing Power, and Shifting the Culture. I'm Stephanie Shaw and I'm a project manager here at the Council of State Governments Justice Center on our juvenile justice team. And I'm joined today by two panelists, John Casteel and Cole Williams. Cole, can you please introduce yourself?

Cole Williams:

Yeah. So I'm Cole Williams from Michigan and I at one point was on the task force to really look at how to reform the juvenile justice system. I'm currently the executive director of The Delta Project and I am a father of two sons who was involved in the juvenile justice system. So thank you for having me.

Stephanie Shaw:

Thank you. Thank you so much, Cole. John?

John Casteel:

Hello, my name is John Casteel, a formerly adjudicated youth from Michigan and I served also on the Juvenile Justice Reformation Task Force for the State of Michigan.

Stephanie Shaw:

Thank you so much to both of you for being here today. We're so excited. And just some background on the Council of State Governments Justice Center. We are a national nonpartisan nonprofit that works to strengthen community safety and improve outcomes for people experiencing the justice system.

This webinar is supported by the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention, which works to support states, counties, and tribal governments in developing effective and equitable juvenile justice systems and promoting safe communities and youth empowerment.

OJJDP has recently released a number of solicitations and I'll drop those links in the chat. Importantly, all of these grant opportunities require youth and family partnership to be essential feature of the proposals and projects. So today's webinar is a great resource in engaging in this important work.

And so for today we'll discuss the problem we're working to solve, share a framework that helps us engage with young people and families in meaningful ways and we'll also discuss the example of Michigan and how Michigan worked to include youth and families in their juvenile justice task force work.

So first, defining the problem. So juvenile justice systems are recognizing the critical importance of partnering with youth and families in more meaningful ways, but these are often ad hoc and ineffective. And as a result, families often feel blamed for their lack of engagement and systems should really begin considering to develop a more family-centered approach instead of a system-centered approach that is often utilized across the country.

So this gap in family partnership is the result of not prioritizing family partnerships, including not having a strategy and lacking a culture that centers what families really need to be able to engage in both case planning and system reform work. As a result, policies and practices don't take into consideration what families need and they don't get the information they need to navigate the system, inform the services and supports their children need or inform policy and practice that would strengthen outcomes for the entire community.

And when family partnership strategies do exist, they often lack dedicated resources like time and funding, staffing and others to really ensure that families are meaningfully included in the process. And instead, families end up feeling a lot of blame and like they are undervalued in their role as a parent, who is the person that will be there in the long-term guiding their child's growth and development.

It's really important for us to remember that the juvenile justice system will step back and the parent will be there for the long term. So the more the juvenile justice systems can truly partner with families and case planning and developing policies and practices, the better outcomes we will see for everyone.

And so Justice for Families conducted a national survey with more than a thousand family members to understand their experience with the juvenile justice system and they found that families had very negative and exclusionary experiences where families reported they wanted to be more involved in both making decisions about their child's case, their treatment and facilities, and that they felt the majority of system professionals were not really helpful and that policies and practices often cost them time and money they don't have like things for phone calls and missing work to come to court or visit their child while they're in a facility.

So to address this dynamic, we created a framework to help systems think about how their current family partnerships look and how it can be improved. And so in developing this framework, we found both systems, stakeholders and families want more engagement with each other, which is a really important point, but this requires a shift in both policy and culture and system professionals are the ones that hold the power to make this happen. Families can't control policies, funding decisions or how staff view and treat them.

So to support states and counties in taking on this critical work, we outlined what a system-centered approach looks like and also what a family-centered approach looks like so folks could really see the difference along this continuum.

Of note, we hosted a webinar, I believe it was last year that goes more in depth on the framework and other examples from the field including producing a brief on this. And I'll be dropping these in the chat in a minute and so please feel free to check it out along with the framework in order to dig in deeper to these concepts. But to summarize for our discussion today, we have six key themes here and I'll walk through them each.

And so first we have unilateral versus [inaudible 00:06:52] ... versus supportive is really examining whether families are considered a problem to be overcome or a valued partner in decision making. Ad hoc versus comprehensive is looking to understand is family partnership integrated into agency-wide policy and funding decisions including dedicated staffing and resources or is it lacking intentionality and comprehensive implementation?

Generic versus individualized, are family partnership approaches applied to everyone the same or are culture and circumstances accounted for? And obscure versus accountable is considering are there clear consistent information being provided to families to help them navigate the system and participate in system reform initiatives or is there a lack of transparency and evaluation of staff and system performance in this important area?

And lastly, under-resourced versus sustained, are there meaningful resources and supports to do this work well including building the organizational capacity of systems through data collection, training and evaluation or is this even considered during planning and budget decisions?

Again, this is a continuum for systems to consider where you fall along these various areas in order to set goals and advance your practice even further. So to take action begin with self-reflection and leading a new narrative about what real family partnership means.

Some key steps include forming a core team to begin shifting the culture, taking an honest assessment of where your system is and how that might impact engagement and outcomes with youth and families. Promote a new vision backed with policy and funding decisions and champion new ways of engaging with families, including creating designated staff roles and budget items to support this work in a comprehensive and sustained manner. And importantly, ask families directly how they're feeling through both satisfaction surveys, one-on-one conversations and create opportunities to promote this kind of engagement across all stakeholders.

So to highlight a state that developed an intentional strategy, we will talk about Michigan's efforts to engage youth and families in the Task Force on Juvenile Justice Reform. So to give some background, we partnered with Michigan last year to conduct a comprehensive system assessment and developed an intentional component focused on including youth and families in this system improvement work. And to do this we had a few different components.

So first we had designated seats for people with lived experience on the task force. Then throughout the assessment process we hosted listening sessions with youth families and task force members so that task force members could hear young people's experiences and solutions that would inform policy decisions. And we found this to be extremely impactful for task force members in understanding the real impact of policy and practice on youth and families. And young people and their family members were glad they could provide this perspective to people making decisions that impact their lives.

We work to organize these listening sessions which require deep engagement with community-based organizations, strong facilitation including transparency and authenticity. We hosted multiple prep sessions with youth and families and of course compensated young people and their family for their time and expertise in all that they shared with us.

And from these listening sessions and other partners like Cole here on the panel today, we work to recruit other parents to participate in working groups that were developed in order to identify policy solutions for diversion and court processing and out-of-home placement including detention.

And to support parents in their role on the working groups, we created a parent advisory board where we met on a monthly basis to discuss how it was going, what they needed to engage in policy and often jargon-heavy discussions and share their feelings about how system stakeholders might have talked about young people and families in the working groups.

And lastly, in creating task force recommendations, a variety of implementation working groups were developed to sustain the work and all of these working groups had designated seats for people impacted by the juvenile justice system to ensure this family partnership continued.

And so now we'll hear from two panelists on what their experience was like on the task force and why their role in system reform initiative is so critical to ensuring effective solutions for youth and families and communities. We're so excited to have you here today with us. I'm going to take my slides down so we have a discussion. I'm going to stop my share.

So thank you all. Thank you to both of you so much for being here. To start us off, Cole, can you share with us why is working to create system change important to you and why did you want to participate on the task force?

Cole Williams:

Yeah, those are two really great questions. I would say to answer the first question, working to create system change was important to me because it really leads to equitable outcomes for individuals, youth and their families. And so I thought, for me, that's really innovative, but I also wanted to be a part of this because recognizing that we got to challenge the status quo and we've got to really be looking at

outdated systems and how those outdated systems impact families that are involved in the JJ system. But most importantly, we have to find ways to work collectively to really solve some of these wicked and complex problems.

And so when I joined the task force, that was really the root in mind. But when I also take a deep dive in this space in answering that question, I also have to think about what was it for me as it related to this task force. And it was really about creating the space where my voice could be heard and carrying the voices of other families that I serve who have children involved in the juvenile justice system and recognizing that I wanted to be in the space, finally that invited me to the table to have a discussion around what I was experiencing, but most importantly, what are parents experiencing across the State of Michigan as it relates to transforming or re-imagining the juvenile justice system.

And I think when I entered into that task force, that was really my goal in mind is how do I enter into this space and be effective, but how, importantly, do I make sure that the voices of the families that I serve get heard and not only get heard, but we actually have a stake in the game by actually creating policies that really support youth and family. So that was what I signed up for and it has been a journey thus far, for sure.

Stephanie Shaw:

Excellent. Thank you so much. John, similar question. Why is working with youth and families that are experiencing the justice system important to you and why did you want to participate on the task force?

John Casteel:

So yeah, that's me. I am a juvenile justice, somebody who was affected by that, my parents were affected by that, my kid's going to be affected by that. So yeah, I definitely got a dog in the fight, just the clear and obvious lack, that the youth aren't getting invested in properly and it's just sad to see. It really takes a village with any child and we all have kids so we should all be investing.

But when it comes to juvenile justice, my experience isn't like everybody else's experience. I was able to make it through on the other side and see it from the other end. And most kids these days, they don't make it that far. So I just want to give somebody else that hope that somebody gave to me.

Stephanie Shaw:

I appreciate that. Thanks, John. And so, John, what was it like to be on the task force? What was good or great about it and what do you think could have been better?

John Casteel:

Well, I mean me not knowing much about law, things like that, it was definitely an eye-opening experience. I learned so much. Everybody was so much more than I thought they would be. Going into this not knowing much about the system besides my experience and being on the criminal side of it, I had no idea how much of a headache I must have been.

But everybody opened up to me. Everybody was very nice. They made me feel at home at every meeting I attended. And it was amazing to be able to be heard after a lot of juvenile justice, a lot of DHS, a lot of CPS. I've been involved in this system since I was three years old. So there's a lot of overlooking there, but now I feel like I finally got a chance to be heard.

Stephanie Shaw:

That's great. I'm glad that you felt that way from participating in this. Cole, what was it like for you to be on the task force and what was good or hard about it?

Cole Williams:

Yeah, I think like John too, I feel like everyone that was on the task force did a really great job of making sure that I felt comfortable in this space. And then when I did share or provide any thought or feedback as it related to the topic of discussions that we were having, I felt heard in that space.

There was a lot of information that I had to learn as I was moving through the process, but also in addition to that, I think it was really important for me because there was so much language. There was a lot of language barriers, acronyms that I didn't really understand. And even in the process I was thinking, oh, shouldn't I know this?

And so part of it I found myself struggling with, okay, I don't know this information, I'm trying to learn this acronym, how do I make sure that I speak up for families? How do I make sure that I interject the thought while at the same time learning as I'm going within the conversation and context of the discussions? So I found it very challenging just navigating in the space where there is a culture already created in the juvenile justice system and there is a language that's already created in that system as well.

And I think for me, it really reminded me of what it was like entering into the courtroom or what it was like meeting a probation officer for the first time where there's just this coded language that you have to try to decipher while trying to make sure you're getting your voice heard and articulating in a way that if you're in a room with folks that already have a shared language that you don't sound like you don't know what you're talking about.

And so I think that there was a lot of opportunity for my own self-reflection, but also a lot of opportunity for me to understand these language barriers and why I think it was so important for me to be in that space to really be able to say to folks, "Hey, this language, it's really hard to decipher and understand. And so if it's hard for me to understand and I'm on the task force, I can only imagine what it must feel like and can imagine what it feels like to be in other spaces where I'm trying to break this all down and advocate for myself at the same time."

So I think for me it was really a huge learning curve, but a learning curve worthwhile because there was a lot that I was able to take away and gain and use in my work serving families.

Stephanie Shaw:

Yeah, that's a really important point about parents that are working to navigate the system during an emotional time where their child's involved in the justice system and working to decipher the language. And even for us when we go from state to state or county to county, we're doing the same exact thing as far as what does this term mean? What is this process? And it's often very confusing. And so imagine-

John Casteel:

Especially ... Oh, sorry.

Stephanie Shaw:

No, I'm okay.

John Casteel:

I was going to say, especially when somebody's going through a stressful time like that, a part of the brain, the amygdala swells up, which it affects every part of your brain that has to do with decision making, especially comprehension. You can't even comprehend your consequences when you're in a state like that.

Stephanie Shaw:

Right, totally. So on that note, do you guys have any suggestions on what courts or probation or other juvenile justice agencies could do to break that down? I mean there's a reality of every industry has terms and process, but what would be helpful for parents and kids? Kids too, they're going through the system and they don't know what some of this stuff means. And so curious if you have ideas on what might be useful for parents and families and young people as they work to understand the system that they're going through.

Cole Williams:

One thing that we can do is we've got to do, I don't want to say do away with, but find creative ways to talk about the system in language that is easy to digest. So that's one.

I think we also have to do a better job of how we send out information to families. So if I see this letter that comes in the mail and I know that this letter, if it says family court on it, but I already have identified family court from my experiences or experiences from others in my village that family court isn't a safe space, it is going to end when I open the letter and I constantly see fines and fees and other language that one, I can't understand quite well. I may do something like, ignore this, this letter.

So I think it's really important in terms of how we're disseminating information from the standpoint of mail. How do we make sure that we send out a postcard and how does the postcard reflect the village and the community that it's going out to? How do we get into social media? How do we make sure that we're creating media and posts that really highlight this idea when we talk about family court, that family court is really about serving families.

And so I think part of it is really shifting the narrative in terms of what we're doing in terms of disseminating information about getting resources to families, which is one of the big things that I find in my work serving families.

And I think too, one of the things that I think that folks can do is really create true lived partnerships and collaborations with families. This whole top down approach doesn't necessarily serve families and youth who are in a system that they don't know, they're struggling to understand while at the same time having high anxiety and stress and even bouts of depression and shame and guilt because now you have a child involved in the system that you don't have any power to control or understand.

So I think, for me, it's really about how we disseminate information, how we make sure that the information is digestible and relatable to the families that we're serving, but most importantly, how can systems do a better job of collaborating and partnering? And for me, that's one of the big things I find in my work. It's really important that we do a better job of collaborating with families and doing it with an equitable lens. But I can go on.

Stephanie Shaw:

No, that was great. Thank you. I don't-

John Casteel:

[Inaudible 00:24:10].

Stephanie Shaw:

Oh. John, any other suggestions on helping families and young people break down the language so it's clear or what courts and probation and detention, all our facilities could do to share this information with everyone?

John Casteel:

Yeah. So I know what happened to me when I was going to court, I basically felt like I was going to die. Having your freedom stripped away is kind of similar to losing your life. But I just remember I felt alone, I felt really alone and lost and stressed out and overwhelmed and it wasn't a good feeling.

So over at Growth Works, we asked around, we asked judges if there's anything they could do to change the language at all. I know in Michigan they can't. It's so written in stone, it's just down to the core they have to say these words and these terms and they can't really change it. But I even asked if maybe they could say it that way and then say it another way, which was, it was kind of running in circles.

So we came up with this, it's a Juvenile Advisory Council court hearing handbook and it basically breaks it all down on who's going to be in the courtroom, even what you should wear to the courtroom, maybe arrive a little bit early, so you know where you're going, just because who knows stuff like that? Who knows to notify the court officer when you arrive, who knows that? I know a lot of people who wear shorts to court, that's a big no-no. Don't wear a hat, a lot of people they don't know that.

So I mean just breaking down what types of hearings there are. There's pre-sentence investigations, there's trials. Most of the time people don't know what they're showing up for, so there's no way they can be prepared.

There's different resources in here on who you can call to find out what resources there are out there because there are resources, a lot of people just don't ... nobody knows about them. So if we could really put these resources on a pedestal to where people could find them before finding the courtroom, that would be a win for everybody.

And then in the back we break it down just to definitions, like a glossary because who knows what a disposition is, who knows what an adjudication is, legally admissible evidence? Those aren't layman terms.

So this definitely should be getting utilized. I know we printed a bunch of them and we plan on dispersing them through different courts and police stations and stuff like that. And maybe even a courtroom liaison, somebody who's experienced the court, somebody who's been on the other side and can offer a little bit of sympathy, compassion and care.

Cole Williams:

So can I jump in, because I think ... I just asked the question and then just jumped in anyway, right? What I think is brilliant about what John just said is because that language is really important and it's written so it's a real document, so I can go back and say, "Hey, I read this," and not feel like, oh, I'm second guessing the thought because it's not written, or I think I heard the judge say this or I think I heard the attorney say this, but that lived document is important.

And I think John, what also you said, which is brilliant too, is that it's really important for systems across the country to do a better job at recognizing lived experience of the families that are a part of the system, and I won't say graduate, but have navigated the system successfully in a way that they can come back and speak in a voice and speak in a tone that a family could understand because of that lived experience.



And I think that that really is a thing that the courts have to do a better job at elevating and moving up because I think you're going to feel less isolated when you have someone next to you who has that lived experience. And I think that's really an important piece. And I think we also have to look at all the cultural biases and all of the things that come along when we talk about courts and the system and its process.

So I think the more and more we can find ways to take the system and its language and creatively reimagine how to use it to support families in the way that the family shows up is really going to make a difference in how families engage the process of the services that the court may provide to a family.

So John, I mean hands down, my life would've been completely different had I had that. My life would've been completely different as a parent had I had someone walking that process with me. But most importantly, my life would've been completely different had I knew that there was somebody in that place that could support me in a courtroom where I didn't necessarily feel like I fit in or I understood the process.

So I think it does make a difference how we use the language and it has to go beyond just having a brochure, but it has to be somebody who's lived it to walk alongside you with the information that the court provides.

John Casteel:

Exactly.

Stephanie Shaw:

I think you guys have made amazing points and I've seen that guide from Growth Works and it's excellent and I think it's something jurisdictions across the country should really engage in and share this information with young people and families. And I love the idea, Cole, what you said about that it's written down, they can refer back to it. These are complex legal terms. I didn't know these terms until I started working with the juvenile justice team here. And so I think these are all things that are useful for everyone.

Both of you use really strong language around some of the emotions that you've experienced as a father and as a young person going through the system, shame and guilt and alone and loss. And then here we are talking about peer supports and how that would really have helped you not just understand but be a guiding hand and support in that process.

So just curious what solutions you might have for folks on the line around what would help you work through those emotions as you're going through this process with your child or yourself? Is it peer support? Is it advisory, like family support groups or peer groups?

Just curious, like other things that courts and justice agencies should be considering when they're working with people, and of course you're having these intense emotions because your liberty or your child's liberty is at risk. And so just curious, any other ideas or things you want to speak to on that of what should be considered in the process?

Cole Williams:

John, I'll let you go.

John Casteel:



I think definitely what best affected me the last few years working in the juvenile justice system is going through the trauma training and just seeing it through a whole different lens, not what's wrong, but what happened and just being more curious instead of judgmental. It's really eye-opening once you get outside of yourself.

People and especially these kids that are so adverse and going through so much, they really want to talk to somebody. They really want to tell people what's going on and if you really listen, you'll hear it. So I think it's definitely care. It's care. People want to know that you care. They don't want to know what you know.

That's what happened for me, it was just that one positive healthy adult-child relationship. That's all it takes. One healthy person that doesn't change, that doesn't give up. That's really it. Somebody provided, they offered me an opportunity, they uplifted me every chance they got and eventually it led to restoration.

Stephanie Shaw:

I think that's just so powerful what you said about listening and really working at the relationship and understanding beyond yourself and going that extra mile when you need to, to pull that kid up. And it was just so powerful what you just shared. Thanks, John. I really appreciate that.

Cole Williams:

Yeah, John, I 100% agree with you too. I think so often in these spaces we forget that families do and youth do feel isolated in these types of situations. I mean, to be quite honest with you, my journey was quite interesting because I called the police on my son and I was anticipating when the police came that they would somehow scare him into acting right. And when he arrived to the juvenile detention center because that I called the police, I was quite shocked by his uniform. I walk in, I see him, he see me, he's handcuffed, he's got on this uniform and I'm thinking to myself, oh, I did this to him. I called the police that led to him in the juvenile detention center. Now I'm in family court.

So there was so much shame and guilt that I had that I don't think sometimes people recognize what happens to families when they're desperate for support. And there's this common language or narrative that's constantly told to parents when trying to get services, well, you might have to wait till he gets in trouble or when they get in trouble with the law and then that's when all the resources will come. Well, that's not proactive.

And so I think for me, one of the things that the court can do and the system can do in terms of serving families is really create spaces. And I really want to say safe spaces because a safe space really requires a lot of work and intentionality when we're talking about families who are coming in hurt and ashamed and isolated and have lost their community, have lost their families, have lost a lot because their child might be struggling with mental health that might lead into some behaviors that lead into criminality. It's all of those things, and so you start to lose a lot along the way.

And I don't think sometimes the court takes or even sees the amount of loss that a family has to lose and then they show up to court in a place that you don't know. I might see my neighbor, I might see my cousin, I might see some folks in my community and this might be a place of shame for me. And so I think that courts have to do a better job of really culturally creating atmospheres and experiences for families where they get that support from other parents who have that lived experience.

And so I think that we've been really doing a great job in Michigan around serving families, but there's so much work to do because families don't trust the system. And so I think part of this, again, is creating

atmospheres and experiences so families can learn how to trust and partner with systems so that they can get the support that they need and the resources to serve their families.

But that takes, again, intentionality, but it also takes ingenuity and to have an imagination because this work really requires a host of that and shifting how we do business. Some of the old stuff isn't working, and so we've got to look at creative ways to do that and I think that's one way to do it.

Stephanie Shaw:

Yes, really powerful. Thanks, Cole, for sharing about your own experience and just all the things that come along with that and some solutions around that.

I want to shift gears a little bit and talk about the system reform work. I think we've been talking a lot about family partnership and as families going through the system, but families and young people have a lot to offer as far as ideas and solutions of what policy and practice should really look like that will support them in getting the help that they want and need. I hear you're both saying that.

And so John, I know that you participated in the listening sessions that we hosted with youth, families and the task force members. Curious, what impact do you think this had on the task force members?

John Casteel:

I think that definitely hearing from the families carried a lot of weight. They were obviously very emotionally distraught from what they had been through. And it seemed like me, they just wanted to know that somebody was fighting on their behalf. They just wanted to know that they could hope for the future to be better. I know that's what I think when it comes to my kids. I got a 9-year-old and an 11-year-old. Who's to say they will never end up in the juvenile justice system?

So yeah, I think their words definitely carried weight. It definitely hit me right in the heart because they didn't have any trust. Like Cole just said, there was no trust there, there was no faith in the system. And the system has the potential to really help people, to really change people's lives and it's sad to see it being so misused.

Stephanie Shaw:

Yeah, the trust piece is really critical. I think as someone who was working to facilitate those sessions that from participating, people felt really empowered to be able to share this information with the governor's office and elected officials and all these people with power. And it created a sense of community among everyone participating as well, which I thought was really just awesome to be a part of.

Cole, curious, from your perspective, why do you think involving youth and families in system change work is important? What do you think policy makers and others really learn and gain from involving them that they may otherwise not know?

Cole Williams:

So that's an interesting question because for me, I start to actually think that in order to really see families in a family-centric approach, we also have to start to look at the professionals that are providing services to these families and really start to unpack their own personal biases or their perceptions around how they have had experiences with the families and the history of serving families.

Because I think those biases truly impact whether or not we can even imagine a family-centered approach, this idea or concept of involving members of a family to make decisions and valuing their

input when families are coming into a system and we're looking at children's behaviors and associating that to parenting practices.

And so I think that if we're going to do that, we really have to look at how courts and how systems are really, really structuring out the way that they're looking at equity and they're looking at their own biases around serving families.

Because I think that it's great to say, "Hey, we want to create a space for families," but I think the problem that I'm finding is that we create this space for families but there's no trickle-down effect. And so the family isn't as a part of the system because you can find that systems also don't trust families.

And not only that, but systems have had families of multiple generations in front of them. And so this idea of, wait, a family centered approach, trusting family members to make decisions about their family? Oh wait, that's a paradigm shift, but I think it's a requirement that we all have to do when we're talking about the best ways to serve families. Because here's the thing, I know my son better than anybody and I know what my son needs.

Now the challenging part is that most of the parents that I work with and serve may not have the tools or the skills or the training that so many professionals have to be able to unpack those skills, those tools that they have within them. So I think when we're talking about family-centered approaches, I think it requires a host of trainings and I think people just being intentional about making sure that we can be honest about what we think about families and really doing the work to change that.

And I think it's possible and it's habitable, but I think it really does require us doing some heavy lifting around our biases and perceptions around families and the culture of families in the system as well. So I don't even know if I answered that question, I just-

Stephanie Shaw:

No, that was great. And I think that John was talking about kids trusting people in the system and the flip of does the system trust families and young people to make good decisions and participate and be a part of the process? So just so much real emotion too, and important, like trust, we're talking about shame and feeling alone.

These are deep feelings that I think really need to be honored as young people and families are going through the system and or participate in system transformation that your experience is really valuable because you understand the depth of what has happened for your family and you're not a number or a policy or a practice and how this really impacts you and your life. You still have to go to work every day and clean the house and do all the things on top of this very stressful event that the whole family's going through. And so I just urge folks to really think about that.

I'm going to drop in the chat, we have some of the takeaways from the task force members about what they learned from the listening sessions in Michigan where they really shared the impact of hearing young people and family members talk about what it was like. A young person was detained and nobody told him what was going on for two days and how scary that was for him of just being in this room and not really knowing. Or a parent sharing that her son had dental work done and no one told her or consulted with her.

These things, a tooth in your child's mouth, you want to be a part of that decision making, nevermind informing the wider policy family partnership standards of when and how families need to be involved in decisions and just setting up policies that would work. I don't think any task force member would not want that, that they of course want families to be able to participate in those ways and for young people to feel empowered and understand the process they're moving through. So just so folks in the audience can see and hear how task force members responded, I think that's something great to check out.

So in thinking about some ways that states and counties can work more effectively with youth and families, like their individual cases, navigating the system, we've kind of talked about this, but thinking about working together on policy development and implementation, we've talked about the jargon and things like that. Are there other things that you think juvenile justice agencies should do in order to be able to really partner with families on policy development and implementation?

Cole Williams:

I think one of the things I think that stands out for me that they can do is really partner with community-based organizations that are already boots to the ground doing the work and are already in the community that the families live and families typically trust. And so I think when we want to address systemic issues like poverty and racism and unequal access, I think it's really important for us to recognize that a lot of our community-based organizations are already doing that work.

And so I think it's really important for us to be doing that because I think what I've also observed in my work when it comes to systems across the board is that systems are operating out of silos and they're doing their own thing. But the challenge with that is that when one family enters the system, one system, typically there is a shared system where families are entering into multiple systems.

And so what I discovered and being a family and working from the other side of that is that systems have to be sharing and braiding not only their funding but they also should be sharing and walking families along the way. And part of the way that they can do that is partnering with community-based organizations within the village who also have that relationship that can be resource brokers and walk alongside the family as well. And I think for me that has been huge in changing the landscape in terms of how families feel supported when we're already partnering with it.

And so for me, if you want to connect with me, I want to see that your organization, the court is partnering with other organizations so I understand what it means to partner and that I'm not being dropped off into a space that there's no connection with the organization. So I think that's been big for me to see courts working with community organizations to serve families.

Stephanie Shaw:

That's great, thank you. And I think having different people and voices at the table, it just helps expand who's involved, what solutions come up. And I think the idea of the safe space and the trust that exists with a community-based organization that's there that understands the culture in that local neighborhood can really help facilitate honest dialogue where then you can really source great ideas and partnerships with families on how to improve systems.

Sometimes when we're not really listening and talking to each other even when we want to, it's hard to get at that meat and we're all caught up in the stress of the moment versus the substance of what we're trying to accomplish.

I don't know, John, any advice for states and counties on small things that make a big difference in engagement, whether it's in case planning or on policy development? We're talking about big feelings, but sometimes those small things really make a big difference in how we're able to show up and engage.

John Casteel:

Yeah, I'd say definitely what Cole was hitting on, that unspoken judgment or characterization, just to really hit things off on the right foot because first impressions really matter. Like he was saying about when you get that letter, it's the same thing when you meet your probation officer or whatever case management organization you're with.

It takes so little genuine care. It's just a little bit. Just a little bit goes such a long way, like I said before, just to provide and offer uplift and restore the whole family. The whole family, because I know with me, I went through the system but my little sister didn't, so she didn't get any help at all to this day. My parents, they didn't get any help. So I'd go to juvenile for a year and I'd come back and parents are still drinking, they're still using drugs.

So definitely that shame, that fear of leaving the family behind. I remember my probation officer would take me out for food and I either wouldn't get anything or I'd have to ask can we get extra for my family? So I guess that's how you can't succeed really without uplifting the whole family.

Cole Williams:

Wow.

Stephanie Shaw:

Yeah, wow. Thanks, John, for sharing that. That's just so impactful for me and hearing just even as a kid, what you're balancing of your whole family and you can't bring food home or eat if they're not. And are we even considering that when we're working with young people. And food is always something I use to build relationships with kids and extra goes home and all that, but just really thinking about some of those basic needs for the whole family and how that can really create strong relationships and trust and also create stability. We talk a lot about food and transportation and these things and just how important they are to really supporting folks and creating stability, which is really important.

So I think, something I think Cole said earlier too was like, this is family court and so here we are talking about family partnership and family court. So curious, Cole, what do you think states and counties could better do to center families in a set of systems and family court? What barriers would need to be removed for this to work for real in practice? And what supports do you think families need in order to participate in system reform efforts and be centered?

Cole Williams:

Yeah, I think a couple things come to mind for me when I reflect on that question. One of the things I think I start to think of is this idea back again of partnership because I'm finding that we're talking about the juvenile justice system for the State of Michigan right now or across the country, but I also think about the Department of Health and Human Services and I also think about community mental health services.

And I often ask myself being a person that participated in all of these systems, this idea of how do we do a better job of working together? And I think we talk a great deal about it, but I don't necessarily think it trickles down to the experiences that families have. And so when we do our customer surveys and we talk to families, I think it's really important that we start to recognize that families are really feeling just passed around from one system to the next.

And I think that what would've been amazingly helpful for me is that instead of calling the police, I should have been able to call a crisis team that would help my son. Knowing that I have a son as a first time offender would've been great if there was a diversion program available that I knew about that I didn't have to go into court to have access to that, but I was struggling.

So I think that recognizing that our resources have to be shareable, recognizing that they have to be shareable and deliverable services that culturally reflect the people that they serve. I think that we have to do an amazing job or a better job of course, of addressing biases and cultural competency when it comes to trainings with judges and lawyers and court staff and all of the folks that are in these spaces.

And I think also we really have to really look at mediation and how to better solve family disputes because I think part of this is really about all of that stuff. Had I had these tools or knew that these things were available in an array of services like 211 or something that I can call and there is this service line that really outlines for me, okay, this is the need, I think it would make a complete difference.

I think that all of our systems have to do a better job of really working together and partnering with each other so it can become a reflection that I can see mirrored from their work when it comes to my own family. But when there's such a divide with all these systems, who can I trust? And I think that's part of why a family-centered approach is important because families can tell you that.

Stephanie Shaw:

Yes.

Cole Williams:

They'll tell you.

Stephanie Shaw:

They'll tell you that and more. And I think that it's ... Oh. So go ahead.

Cole Williams:

Yeah. And I think this is the other part, they'll tell you in a way that doesn't have a lot of acronyms to it and they'll tell you in a way that doesn't maybe feel good and they'll tell you in a way that doesn't have a professional zest to it. I think that sometimes when families show up without that professional zest, oh they're not competent, but really they are. And so I think it really requires a shift in that.

And then lastly, I think that we really have to talk about transparency and accountability that states and counties can do to increase how they support families and provide information about families' rights as well. So I could go on and on, so just stop me.

But I think for me that is what I'm hearing families say across the State of Michigan, and I'm going to be requiring, family court, when I ask is family court for families, I need to at one point, at some point someone say, yes it is. And right now I can't honestly say from the experiences from families that I serve that they believe that family court is for families.

Stephanie Shaw:

That was great. So much there. And I think your point in particular that I think is really important for system professionals here on this webinar is when families show up in crisis or even in system transformation work, they haven't had an opportunity to release this emotion to someone in power who's listening.

And there really needs to be space for an initial session or two focused on just venting what that experience was like, why they're upset, like during our listening session prep. That's why we had two or three sessions before we met with folks in the task force was to create that space in order for them to then really show up in a way that is more meaningful in the sense of solution oriented.

It doesn't discount that that part is needed and that we shouldn't shy away from it, that's real and part of their experience. And when we engage in system transformation work with families, we need to create space for the emotions that they experienced along the way. And it's really unfair to ask them to

bottle that up without making space for that, and it's just really not possible a lot of the time because it's just so overwhelming.

So I just appreciate the insight that families can bring that we need conflict resolution, you're raising teenagers. There's going to be hot moments in the house, and how do we have resources that aren't detention and police that help families in moments of crisis, like youth mobile crisis, diversion opportunities and really working side by side with families to create resources that make sense and not pathways that, that's a good idea, but is that going to work in practice?

And so I think there's tremendous wisdom that system professionals can really learn from parents and young people on what they need in order to solve problems outside of the justice system, because I don't think the justice system wants to be mediating family conflict either. And that's a space for more intense crimes that disrupt community safety. And we want to then be able to tailor our resources for young people that need more support around those things versus who's fighting with who and all that kind of stuff.

So I think in order to get to some of that wisdom in ways that system professionals can hear, that families can express in ways, there needs to be space to really open up the dialogue and build that into the process. And that's why I think in Michigan, those listening sessions were really impactful because we created space for families to vent and talk about the emotional piece. And they still shared that with task force members, but not with such intensity I would say, because they had opportunity to get it out, talk about it, and then still share some of the emotions, but in a way that I think is easier for people to absorb.

So just the reality of that process is important for folks to create that, to get to the other side, and then talk about skills, training and jargon, and these are the terms and all that stuff, that training that we all need to be able to engage in system reform work.

So I know we're running a little short on time, and so wanted to wrap up with these last questions. John, curious if we engage in more youth-centered and family-centered approaches, how do you think that might impact outcomes for young people and the community and just their overall engagement in the work?

John Casteel:

Well, I mean every at-risk kid is individual, is particular. They might have similarities with other kids or other kids with cases like theirs, but in no way, shape or form are they the same kid. But I see a lot of uniformity in the wrong ways too. It's unpredictable uniformity.

So I think that punishment has to be predictable and it has to be just. I mean, justice and mercy are definitely hard things to navigate through, but that's what the court's for, that's what judges are for. You guys get the hard job. But yeah, I think then they end up with the right outcome. They end up with their outcome.

I think these kids are our future. They are our future no matter what they've been through. So we need to treat them like that, sacred people.

Stephanie Shaw:

Oh, that's so beautiful. You're singing to my heart, John. So thank you for closing us out with such warmth and wisdom. And I just really want to thank you both so much for all you're doing for young people every day and participating in this work, being on this webinar, being on the task force. You've had such a tremendous impact and I know there'll be more to be had. So thank you.



Thanks to everybody on the line. We will follow up with more resources and share additional links. If you have other questions, don't hesitate to reach out to me and I'm happy to make connections or share more information about strategies other jurisdictions are engaging in to really center families and young people in the juvenile justice system. So thanks everybody so much and I hope you have all a good rest of the day.