An Advocate’s Guide to Meaningful Family Partnerships: 
Tips from the Field

June 2010
“An Advocate’s Guide to Meaningful Family Partnerships” is the first step in an effort to support increased family partnership in juvenile justice. It is a product of the National Juvenile Justice Network (NJJN), and was created under the guidance of NJJN’s Director, Sarah Bryer, with substantial input from the Family Advocacy Partnership Committee of the National Juvenile Justice Network. Wendy Henderson was the primary author of the text and conducted all of the interviews. This paper would not have been possible without the generous time and information from the following advocates in the field who were all interviewed between September and October, 2009: Abby Anderson, Connecticut Juvenile Justice Alliance; Grace Bauer, Campaign for Youth Justice (formerly of Families and Friends of Louisiana’s Incarcerated Children); Barbara Huff, co-founder, National Federation of Families for Children’s Mental Health/Huff Osher Consultants; Cheryl Kreager, Juvenile Justice Coalition of Minnesota; Zachary Norris, Books not Bars, California; Liane Rozzell, Families & Allies of Virginia’s Youth; David Utter, Southern Poverty Law Center (formerly of Juvenile Justice Project of Louisiana); and Shannon Wight, Partnership for Safety and Justice, Oregon (formerly with Citizens for Second Chances, Louisiana).

The National Juvenile Justice Network (NJJN) enhances the capacity of state-based juvenile justice coalitions and organizations to press for state and federal laws, policies and practices that are fair, equitable and developmentally appropriate for all children, youth and families involved in, or at risk of becoming involved in, the justice system. By collaborating with state, local and national change agents for children and by creating a network that is itself effective and respected, NJJN works to ensure that every state’s juvenile justice system develops model laws, policies and programs. NJJN currently has 40 members from 33 states, and 15 partner organizations that support its work.

For more information about NJJN, visit www.njjn.org or e-mail info@njjn.org

This publication is made possible by a generous grant from the John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation.

Cover photo courtesy of Books not Bars, an Ella Baker Center Campaign — www.ellabakercenter.org.


Copyright 2010, National Juvenile Justice Network.
In the field of juvenile justice advocacy, professional advocates and the families who are directly affected by juvenile justice policies are often disconnected. Yet juvenile justice advocates are well aware that families frequently possess an intimate understanding of the changes necessary to fix the system, will seek reform with intensity, urgency and passion, and can be the most compelling public spokespeople for change. Not surprisingly, professional advocates have a long history of seeking out and attempting to incorporate families into existing reform efforts, but the path to partnership has not always been smooth.

This guide, geared towards the professional juvenile justice advocate working towards systemic administrative and legislative reform, tackles some of the common hurdles that prevent effective partnership with families by outlining simple and achievable action steps. The guide provides concrete suggestions on how to be more intentional in building sustainable partnerships with families so the movement towards creating fair, equitable and developmentally appropriate juvenile justice systems can proceed with the inclusion of these integral voices for change.

The Current Role of Families in Systems Advocacy

According to a survey of National Juvenile Justice Network member organizations, most (80 percent) are or have partnered with families and many (69 percent) think it is of high importance. Organizations incorporate families into strategy and policy development, media activities, organizing, legislative education, and administrator training. Groups that do not partner with families cite two primary reasons: 1) inability to find families to work with; and 2) lack of resources (time and monetary) to support a meaningful partnership.

Juvenile justice system administrators across the country also recognize the importance of partnering with and incorporating families when responding to youth crime. From utilizing evidence-based family treatment programs, to the systematic involvement of families in case management meetings, to involving families in trainings of system employees, system administrators are making headway in establishing family-centered systems of care.

What does it mean to partner with families?
Incorporating family voices in advocacy can take many forms. Throughout this guide, there are examples of a range of partnerships from providing support to an emerging, independent family-based reform group to incorporating individual family members in an existing campaign.

Strategies to Find Family Members Who Are Interested in Advocacy

- Listen to the families that reach out to you. Many groups first connect with families by engaging individual family members who reach out to them. After making appropriate referrals for support of the family’s personal advocacy needs, groups take the names of family
members who are interested in working on systems change, which becomes the beginning of their list for a first meeting or training.

• Wait outside the juvenile prison. Several groups recruit families while visiting youth in correctional placements. Groups hold meetings for family members directly after visiting hours at locations close to juvenile prisons. This strategy is particularly common with groups working to improve conditions of confinement in juvenile facilities.

• Partner with groups that provide direct services and/or support to families. Families already engaged in a supportive environment may be more willing to partner with a juvenile justice advocacy organization on a variety of issues. Advocacy organizations can build on the support infrastructure established by related organizations. Examples of organizations that provide support to families in other areas include the National Association of the Mentally Ill (NAMI), the National Federation of Families for Children's Mental Health (FFCMH), and special education advocacy organizations (such as the PACER Center – Parent Advocacy Coalition for Educational Rights). Similarly, groups like CURE (Citizens United for the Rehabilitation of Errants), which has local chapters across the country and frequently provides support to family members when their loved ones go to prison, provide an opportunity to reach out to family members who may already be working on justice policy change.

• Employ a family member to reach out to other families. Several groups have secured a small grant to employ a family member to conduct outreach to other families. Such outreach can increase perceptions of credibility and sincerity, add diversity to an organization’s advocacy staff, and help ensure long-term success because families are engaged in planning and mobilization from the outset.

Case Study: Finding Families

Family Accountability Sessions, Books not Bars, California

Books not Bars, a non-profit organization based out of the Ella Baker Center in California, began working with families whom they recruited outside of youth prisons during their campaign to improve conditions within youth prisons, reduce prison size, and eventually shut down youth facilities. Books not Bars set up Family Accountability Sessions with the
superintendent of the youth prison. After visiting hours, Books not Bars held a meeting with families who were interested in advocacy, and then the group of advocates and family members went back to the youth prison for a meeting with the superintendent to explain what they all wanted to see done differently. These sessions empowered families, helped them gain direct access to a high-ranking public official, and kept the youth prison accountable to the families of its residents.

How to Help Families Move from Individual to Systems Advocacy

Many families who seek out advocacy organizations are in need of individual advocacy. Professional advocates in the field identify this need as one of the great challenges and opportunities in engaging families in advocacy efforts. Advocacy groups that incorporate families stress the importance of addressing family concerns before asking families to engage in systems reform efforts.

• Advocacy groups should provide some level of individual emotional support to families. Many groups that partner successfully with families provide some individual emotional support to families. Often, this support is accomplished simply by providing a space and time for families to connect and talk to each other. Organizations can also provide emotional support by listening to families’ needs and referring them to other groups that provide more comprehensive individual advocacy.

• Advocacy groups should provide training in the structure and history of juvenile justice systems. Family members who thoroughly understand the juvenile justice system are best equipped to advocate for change. Such training can also help families to address and resolve their individual needs, thereby empowering them and energizing them to seek broader, system-wide reform.

• Advocacy groups should provide advocacy training. Groups can help family members transition from individual advocacy to system reform by providing concrete training in advocacy strategies. Advocacy training equips families with tools to meet their own needs and push for systems change.

How to Ensure Sustainability

Sustainability can often be an issue with family engagement. Many families involved in advocacy efforts are involved only in the short term — for a year or maybe two while their child faces issues in the juvenile justice system. Families involved in multiple systems, often
with additional kids, are typically invested in short-term advocacy and not able to make a long-term commitment. Rather than hand-wringing as families move on to other priorities in their lives, organizations should establish a system so that current family advocates can mentor other families to move into their leadership roles, thus creating a path for sustained family engagement.

Opportunities to Educate and Learn from Families

There is often an inherent imbalance of power between professional advocates and family members. If advocates wish to form a healthy partnership with families, this imbalance should be acknowledged and addressed. One path to help equalize advocates and families is to think about the partnership in terms of co-education. Advocates may know more about the legislative process, but families know more about the impact of the system’s policies on children and families. Each group becomes a better system reformer because of their ongoing partnership and exchange. The larger movement towards reform cannot happen without the unique and integral knowledge of both professional advocates and families.

Case Study: Developing Family Expertise

Citizens for Second Chances, Louisiana

Citizens for Second Chances (CSC) in Louisiana provides training for families at yearly membership conferences. Each year CSC offers a wide range of topics, including a basic primer on the legislative process. After a couple of years of providing the same training, CSC offered to co-present the training with some of their long-standing family members, who now had expertise in the field. Eventually families took over the basic legislative training. When family members become the experts, a balance of knowledge and skills is established, and families empower other families by leading them through the process of becoming better advocates.

Beware, however, of making the mistake of acting as the disseminator of information, without looking to families to share their expertise. Build into training exercises a way that families can showcase and share their unique knowledge about the system.

TENSION:

Underrepresentation of Advocates of Color

Many professional advocates note the inherent tension behind having a mostly white advocacy staff pushing to reform a system disproportionately filled with people of color. While this speaks to a larger problem of the underrepresentation of people of color in professional advocacy roles, in the short term it is important to acknowledge the tension and be mindful of opportunities to ameliorate it. Organizations should make an effort to include family members, especially people of color, as paid staff. Organizations can also provide stipends to families of color who recruit other family members to act as advocates and/or come on as staff members. Incorporating families as paid staff affirms their importance to — and empowers them to take ownership over — the campaign.
How to Address the Challenges of Legislative Timing and Compromise

One of the great challenges of legislative change is that it can take months or years of waiting for a bill to be introduced, and then only minutes in a quick hearing or closed door meeting to hammer out the details. Many advocates find it difficult to get meaningful family input in the short turnaround time often presented when a bill is debated.

A family coordinating committee, or similar group, is one way to ensure quick turnaround. Family members can elect a smaller group to represent them throughout the legislative process, and can empower the group to speak for the larger whole and make real-time decisions. One family-run group empowers the executive director to act on their behalf, as long as the legislation or change falls within one of the ten core principles set by the entire group.

Case Study: The Advantages of Two Voices

Juvenile Justice Project of Louisiana and Families and Friends of Louisiana’s Incarcerated Children, Louisiana

Sometimes families are able to advance positions that advocacy groups cannot, which can be very beneficial. One example of this dynamic is the partnership between the Juvenile Justice Project of Louisiana (JJPL) and Families and Friends of Louisiana’s Incarcerated Children (FFLIC). When FFLIC first began as a group supported by JJPL, both organizations were working with the state to improve conditions of confinement at the most dangerous juvenile prison in Louisiana — Tallulah Correctional Center for Youth. As the families of FFLIC grew more empowered to have their voices heard, it became clear they wanted to join the campaign with JJPL to close Tallulah. Having the parents’ participation and voice was the missing link needed for reform. The partnership was a great strategy that combined the approach of a legal organization with one of an organizing/advocacy group. FFLIC was able to push a harder line than JJPL, given JJPL’s closer connection to lawmakers and its need to be more flexible. In the end, it took just over a year for FFLIC and JJPL to get a commitment from the governor to close Tallulah — an amazing feat that could not have been accomplished by either group without the other.

TENSION: The Necessity to Compromise

It can be difficult to balance the desire of families to hold fast to their legislative goals, without changes, and the political reality that compromise is often a large component of getting legislation passed. This tension can be managed in part by:

1) consistently revisiting and reaffirming the long-term goal, so that short-term compromises do not feel like huge setbacks; and

2) establishing an effective and time sensitive feedback loop so families can weigh in on real-time decisions.
Ways to Incorporate Family Goals

Organizations vary in the extent to which families are involved in setting their advocacy agenda. Possible structures include:

- **Family-driven group** — the agenda comes directly from families involved in the effort. These groups tend to use a strategic planning process to identify a focused and attainable advocacy campaign.

- **Families are represented on the Board** — the Board for the advocacy organization includes family members and sets the strategic priorities for the organization.

- **Families are incorporated into existing campaigns** — advocacy groups have set agendas and work to incorporate families into existing campaigns. In this case, it is particularly important to find an empowering niche for families within the campaign.

**Unexpected Benefit**

By listening to the needs and goals of families, many campaigns have broadened their advocacy efforts and achieved significant victories that make a real difference for youth in the system, such as changes to institutional policy regarding how often families can visit and how medical emergencies are communicated to families.

**Summary: Policies and Processes Needed to Nurture Family Partnerships**

- Engage in deliberate outreach to meet families who are already involved in advocacy and/or are interested in system reform.

- Ensure family members are an integral part of advocacy efforts, not a one-time outside add-on.

- Empower families to participate in advocacy through education and training on juvenile justice systems and advocacy strategies.

- Assist families with individual advocacy, provide them with appropriate referrals, and connect family members to support groups.

- Listen to families, who often have innovative and effective ideas for reform.

- Create a clear structure for family engagement and participation, ensuring that family voices are always heard.

- Level the field by providing adequate information and support to family members and making a concerted effort to engage families of color in advocacy efforts.
Endnotes


2 The recommendations in this guide were developed through a survey of 26 advocacy organizations and eight in-depth interviews with family-led and non-family-led juvenile justice advocacy groups.