

## **Family Meeting Day & Advocacy**

Parents and families involved in the juvenile justice process in Ohio gathered in Columbus, Ohio, on August 6<sup>th</sup> to act as advocates for their young people. They listened as Alphonse A. Gerhardstein, Esq., opened the session by explaining the background and history of the federal class action lawsuit with Ohio Department of Youth Services (ODYS). The class action settlement is designed to address problems in the system: overcrowding, understaffing, violence, education services, as well as mental health, physical health and other programming issues.

Mr. Gerhardstein reported there will be a monitoring team in place to monitor:

- Physical facilities
- Physical and mental health
- Quality assurance program
- Independent grievance review
- Tapping into best practices

Parents talked with the ODYS leadership team about their concerns: lack of transportation; need for local advocacy for juvenile court issues; poor communication with personnel; too few and too limited educational opportunities; and medical care. Parents said they send insurance information to the facilities but are concerned their kids aren't receiving the care they need when they don't receive courtesy telephone calls. Other questions they asked:

- How are we working for change at the local level in the juvenile courts?
- How do you handle parents who refuse to sign unless they can specify certain treatments for their young person?
- Who will provide transportation to facilities?
- Is it possible to expand videotaping to help further connect kids with their families?
- How can we increase educational and vocational opportunities for youth in the facilities so they are better prepared for jobs when they return to the community?

Ohio Department of Youth Services Director Tom Stickrath welcomed and thanked parents. The Director stated *"This is an extremely exciting and challenging time to be at the helm of this agency, but it's also an excellent time to leverage these opportunities to make long-term change in the juvenile justice system. There is a lot coming together that gives me optimism that we can get this work done."*

Dave Shroot, Deputy Director, Division of Parole and Community Services shared information about three community initiatives focused on expanding community capacity to keep kids and families together. The Department is committed to doing the following:

- investing in local communities to build their resources to serve kids and families
- expanding behavioral health services in Ohio; and

- working with the University of Cincinnati to create regional residential programs that will provide an environment where young people can work with volunteers have their families involved. The residential programs are scheduled to open at the beginning of 2009.

Damita Perry, Bureau Chief of Parole, introduced the entire regional administrator team. She described the ODYS jobs program that bridges youth into the workplace and the family advocacy project. She said other programs for young people and video conferencing equipment are available at all regional facilities.

The overall campaign for an effective change in the juvenile justice system includes the community-at-large. Jeffrey A. Butts, PhD., Chapin Hall at the University of Chicago, reported on research results for “Using Youth Development Concepts to Build a Better Juvenile Justice System.” Dr. Butts offered three take-home messages:

1. “Juvenile” crime is the wrong target. The bigger issue is “youth crime.”
2. Youth crime is NOT a mental health disorder. Reducing youth crime requires more than mental health services.
3. The growing field of positive youth development could become an important part of future youth crime programs.

Dr. Butts noted that sensationalist media attention to these issues will increase the number of bad, state-level public policies.

In their presentation “Overview of System Transformation and Legislative Agenda,” Amy Swanson, Executive Director of Voices for Ohio’s Children, and Sharon Weitzenhof of the Juvenile Justice Coalition and member of the Steering Committee for the Voices for Ohio’s Children Juvenile Justice Initiative (JJI), highlighted the need for a transformation in the juvenile justice system. They pointed out that when needed changes are made, the result will be a system committed to:

- fundamental fairness;
- individual, community, and system accountability; and
- recognition of young people’s individuality and potential.

In the upcoming state budget process, the Juvenile Justice Initiative Policy Committee will work with lawmakers on 15 legislative priorities that will remain focused on family involvement and systemic changes.

In closing, Yvonne C. Hunnicutt, Director of Operations & Policy Association for Voices for Ohio's Children, urged parents and families to continue their involvement in the legislative process and be their children’s first advocate.

For more information and to see the Family Meeting Day & Advocacy presentation visit [www.vfc-oh.org](http://www.vfc-oh.org).