

Building Bridges to Benefit Youth

A series of policy briefs produced by:



Engaging Young People in Juvenile Justice Reform Policy Brief No. 4, May 2007

Introduction

Youth are the population most directly affected by the juvenile justice system and yet all too frequently those who aim to improve the system fail to involve young people meaningfully in the process. Youth can be great assets to reform efforts; they bring unique perspectives based on personal experience, energy, passion and creativity. In addition to furthering reform goals, bringing youth into change processes also helps them develop into responsible adults by giving them real opportunities to make a difference in their communities. The benefits are great, although involving youth successfully requires planning and sometimes challenging work.

This brief raises issues that can be considered when embarking on an effort to incorporate youth in juvenile justice reform efforts. It addresses the challenges involved in recruiting and retaining young people and highlights various community-based and governmental organizations that empower youth to advocate for, and provide significant input into, system reform. The resource list at the end of the brief provides sources of guidance for developing effective programs. Much of the information presented here was derived from these sources and much more is available within them.

Engaging Youth in Juvenile Justice Reform Efforts

❖ Why Do It?

Youth can be powerful advocates for reform – they carry the conviction of personal experience and their personal stories demand attention. When young people who have been involved in the juvenile justice system speak out, they can break stereotypes and force others to face the reality of how this system affects real lives and real people. Youth who have not been system-involved still have a critical understanding of the lives and experiences of young people that is important to share. Failure to involve youth in systemic reform efforts squanders an incredible community asset.

Involving youth in system reform also benefits them. Adolescents are ready to “do important work but are given few opportunities to actually do it.”¹ The principles of youth development, which are increasingly accepted as the basis for effective programs, state that it is crucial to help a young person feel connected to and responsible for their community’s well-being. Thus engaging youth in juvenile justice reform work becomes a ready path for youth to experience greater self-efficacy and connectedness. Youth may present at conferences, speak in front of city councils, meet with community leaders and system administrators, and most importantly, get other youth to engage in the improvement of their communities. By giving youth these opportunities to be meaningfully involved - to realize they are influential and able to make a difference - they contribute to significant institutional and systemic reform. These experiences also provide them leadership, public speaking and problems solving opportunities, skills that help them grow and develop as young adults.

Training: An Essential Element

Training youth in community organizing and advocacy is particularly helpful for court-involved youth whose social and political status is marginalized and who are often the most isolated and discriminated against. Engaging youth enables them to obtain important skills, including critical thinking, decision making, consensus, and team building. For disadvantaged and court-involved youth, coordinated and structured training offers these disenfranchised young people a place to build community *and* fight for justice.

Adopting a youth development approach with young people requires training and thoughtful planning that lead to an ultimate payoff: helping youth reach successful adulthood and improving systems that impact youth. These benefits accrue regardless of whether the host organization advocates on behalf of youth or is a justice system player. Taking this path, however, requires a sea change in thinking about system-involved youth, from offenders who need to be punished and/or treated to young people who have made a mistake but who nevertheless have tremendous assets to share. They all can be active agents in larger system reform.

❖ What are the challenges?

There are challenges to engaging youth in juvenile justice reform but solutions are available if addressed early in the process. The list provided here is not intended to be exhaustive but raises some of the areas that might need to be addressed to promote effective youth involvement.

➤ Finding the Right Participants:

- Look for youth who are representative of the advocacy issues being addressed,

¹ What Kids Can Do (2003). *Young Leaders and Heroes: A Veteran Activist Talks About The Power of Youth Organizing*. <http://www.whatkidscando.org/featurestories/YOinterview.html>

and who would benefit from the solutions being presented - court involved; in conflict with the law; at risk; from disadvantaged neighborhoods - young people who are not normally asked to participate in youth programs;

- Proactively reach out to youth - through their peers, through community-based organizations, or by setting up a community-based office;
- To recruit youth with experience of the juvenile justice system go to the places where they are, such as youth detention facilities and youth service providers.

➤ Engaging Youth in Activism:

The Forum for Youth Investment and the Innovation Center for Community and Youth Development have both identified strategies for engaging disadvantaged youth in civic activism. These strategies include:

- Provide young people with a home base, an organization or institution that provides them with the supports and skill-building opportunities to affect change;
- Have an intentional theory of change or set of core beliefs that young people and adults understand and own;²
- Make connections between youth's day-to-day experiences and larger social issues, giving the wider context for the changes they seek to make;
- Teach youth about social movements, political processes, and current events, and empower them to take action against injustice.³

The California Youth Justice Coalition uses role plays in its *Bust the Stereotypes* Workshop to teach youth about systemic oppression. The participants explore race, class, gender and age oppression and the ways in which youth are affected daily by these factors. They are given the tools to begin a critical dialog on the ways in which everyone is implicated in the continued oppression of poor youth and youth of color. Among the roles the participants play are black male youth, pregnant teen, and gay male youth while others play the part of police officer, teacher and others in the community with whom they come into contact in various situations. The feelings of the role players themselves as well as the impact of the scenarios on the rest of the workshop audience feeds a discussion that moves beyond the specific to a more general debate on of the impact of discrimination and the ways in which it is perpetuated.

² The Forum for Youth Investment. "Young Community Mobilizers Share Strategies and Advice about Building Capacity in Under-Resourced Communities." http://www.forumfyi.org/Files//Youth_Mobilizer_Retreat_Article.pdf

³ Innovation Center for Community and Youth Development (2003). *Lessons in Leadership: How Young People Change Their Communities and Themselves*, 7. Takoma Park, MD. http://www.theinnovationcenter.org/register.asp?sect=Lessons_in_Leadership_exec.pdf

➤ Facilitating Long-Term Involvement:

Youth are busy. They go to school, socialize, and have jobs; some are parents. They are reporting to a lot of people – caregivers, school officials, employers, friends, etc., each of whom places competing demands on a young person.

- Recognize and respect the other demands on their time and work around them;
- Make sure that meetings don't conflict with school;
- Provide transportation to and from meetings;
- Youth are sometimes still learning to manage their time – help them with constant reminders of meeting dates.

➤ Providing Practical Supports

- Recognize their financial constraints. Provide stipends if possible and contribute to the cost of transportation.
- Offer help with child care;
- Provide healthy snacks - youth are growing fast!

➤ Turning Youth into Effective Advocates:

Young people are not a homogenous community – individuals will have different needs and widely varied talents. Some may be struggling to achieve grade level in reading or math. Others might have learning disabilities or mental or physical health issues. Many youth, especially youth touched by the juvenile justice system, have low self-confidence. Urging them to speak with decision-makers and media can be daunting. Youth may feel intimidated by adults or feel disempowered by them, and they are often not accustomed to focusing on one project for long periods of time.

- Plan and prepare curriculum that will provide youth with the training they may need in writing skills, critical thinking, decision-making, consensus and team-building;
- Provide adequate staff to properly guide and engage youth advocates and ensure that staff is trained and experienced at working with youth;
- Create an accepting environment where youth feel able to ask questions and participate without fear of being judged or made to feel incompetent.

➤ Making Youth an Integral Part of the Process:

- Incorporate youth as an integral part of a reform effort from start to finish, meaning that youth must be an active part of the decision making process.

If youth have the opportunity to work on the issues they care about, rather than ones imposed on them, they will be involved and passionate;

- Avoid tokenism – respect the young people brought into the process and allow them real opportunities to play a role as partners with the adults;
- Provide space and time for youth to grapple with issues in their own way;
- Don't take over their work -- when youth write materials, adults can offer advice and suggestions to strengthen them but ultimately it must be the young person's own product, written, shaped and driven by them;
- Be aware that they may express themselves differently than adults, use new lingo or be more comfortable with loud and seemingly chaotic group processes;
- Remind adults to be aware of their own power and privilege.

Conclusion

Although involving youth might mean more work on the front end of one's reform process, the effort of harnessing the power and energy of youth can bring tremendous results.

Envision a young person standing before her state legislature relaying the traumatic experiences she went through when placed in a secure detention facility.

Envision a high school class president speaking to his peers at a school assembly and urging them to attend a rally against racial profiling.

Envision a young offender convening regular meetings between residents and staff of a juvenile facility so that concerns can be aired and addressed.

The talent and intelligence of our youth should not be underestimated.

Advocating for Change from Outside the System: Community Based Organizations

The following organizations train young people in organizing to advocate for juvenile justice reform.

- Juvenile Justice Project (NY) Each One Teach One Program

The New York Correctional Association's Juvenile Justice Project in New York City developed the Each One Teach One Program to work with youth, ages 13 to 18, who have been incarcerated or who live in neighborhoods with high rates of youth incarceration. Through a series of lessons, activities and actual engagement in the process, young people learn hands-on skills in advocacy, community organizing,

media literacy and other strategies to make juvenile justice policies more fair and effective.⁴ The youth participate in an annual advocacy day where they can speak directly to state legislators about their experiences with the juvenile justice system and advocate for reform.⁵ At the 2006 advocacy day, the young people asked legislators to provide more money for alternative to incarceration programs; create an independent child advocate office in New York; support a bill that would protect lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender youth in the juvenile justice system from physical and verbal abuse; and support a bill to help sexually exploited youth get safe housing.

Each One Teach One's Curriculum:

Each One, Teach One's workshops draw on popular education techniques, so that each session is interactive and participatory, and members of the group learn from each other and from their own experiences. To create space for reflection, each session closes with journal-writing and "One Word," an activity in which the group joins hands and each person says one word that summarizes their reaction to the workshop

- Part One: Organizing and Activism
 - The Jump-Off: Orientation to Each One Teach One
 - Cell Therapy: An Introduction to the Juvenile Justice System
 - The Front Line: What is Community Organizing?
 - Project Hood: A Look Inside Urban Communities
 - All American Revolution: A Look at Social Movements
 - Attica Revisited: Guest Speaker and Film
- Part Two: Issues in the System
 - What's Your Point?: Debate on Youth Tried as Adults
 - Movie Night: Screening of Juvies Documentary
 - Girlhood: Trip to Brooklyn Residential Center for Girls
 - Against All Odds: Brutality Inside the Youth Prisons
 - Project Lockdown: Trip to Rikers Island
 - Plantation to Penitentiaries: The Prison Industrial Complex
- Part Three: Politics and Power
 - Show Me the Money: How We Can Change the City Budget
 - Know your Rights: What to Do if You are Stopped by the Police
 - Some of My Best Friends Are: The Issues Facing LGBT Youth
 - Soul Connection: Recreating Your Self Image
 - On the Books: How We Can Change Laws
 - Project Reentry: Film Screening with Reconnect Program
- Part Four: Images in the Media
 - Project Website: Create Writings and Art for the Website
 - Made for TV: Media and Youth Criminalization
 - Getting your Message Across: Using Media as a Tool
 - Project TV: Video Training with Manhattan Neighborhood Network
 - Project Interview: Creating Youth Portraits
- Part Five: Be the Change
 - BEEF: A Look at Violence in our Communities
 - Project TRUCE: Speaker and Film
 - No More Youth Jails!: Creating an Organizing Campaign
 - Project Event: Plan for Closing Event

"It's very powerful when you have youth who have navigated the juvenile justice

⁴ The Correctional Association of New York, Juvenile Justice Project Web site, <http://www.correctionalassociation.org/JJP/EOTO/EOTO.htm>

⁵ Ibid at http://www.correctionalassociation.org/JJP/JJC/advocacy_day.htm.

system tell legislators and the City Council what's really going on behind the walls," Asadullah Muhammad, the program's youth training coordinator⁶

➤ California Youth Justice Coalition

The Youth Justice Coalition supports policies that enhance the opportunities available to the thousands of youth in Los Angeles who have been in custody. The Coalition does its primary recruiting in detention centers through their legal workshops, thus being sure to reach out to – and bring in – the youth most affected by juvenile justice policies. The coalition offers these young people free workshops that provide an introduction to organizing skills, tools and tactics for “people who want to take on the prison system and build justice (inside and out)” and covers movement building history, including the strategies that made these movements successful. Students can also earn high school and college credits.⁷ The coalition’s action agenda includes improving conditions in state juvenile justice facilities, replacing these facilities with small, community-based facilities, responding to California’s repressive gang legislation, and preventing youth transfers to adult prisons.⁸

➤ Justice 4 DC Youth! Coalition

The Justice 4 DC Youth! Coalition is an inter-generational group of youth, youth-led organizations, youth service providers, and others working for a juvenile justice system in the District of Columbia that provides comprehensive community-based programs and reduces the city's reliance on incarceration.⁹ The coalition sponsors summer youth organizing trainings to teach young people, especially those who are court-involved, about their rights, the policy process, and how to make a difference in their communities.¹⁰

Justice4DCYouth visited detained youth at the DC Oak Hill Facility to ask them what they would want to say about Oak Hill and the way young people are treated by the system if they had the chance to talk to DC council members. Then they took the messages from the Oak Hill youth to the Mayor’s office and talked to council members about the needs in the facility. Following the meeting, the youth organizers met with adult advisors to debrief over dinner. Rather than give their own judgments, the adults encouraged the youth who attended the meeting to make their own assessment of their effectiveness, what they had done well and what could have been done better.

The coalition also provides youth organizing training within the city’s youth correctional facility.

⁶ Tansia Morris, *Each One Teach One: Teens demand change in the juvenile justice system*, Youth Communication, December 2006

<http://www.youthcomm.org/NYC%20Features/Dec2006/NYC-2006-12-04a.htm>

⁷ California Youth Justice Coalition newsletter. http://njjn.org/media/resources/public/resource_170.pdf

⁸ National Juvenile Justice Network Web site. Member Organization Profile.

http://www.njjn.org/members_public_state_CA.html

⁹ Ibid at http://www.njjn.org/members_public_state_DC.html.

¹⁰ National Juvenile Justice Network (2006). *State-Based Initiatives of Members of the National Juvenile Justice Network*. <http://www.nassembly.org/ncy/documents/State-BasedJuvenileJusticeCampaigns.pdf>

Liz Ryan (one of the organizers of the Coalition) quotes Indian leader Mahatma Gandhi in explaining her belief in the importance of involving youth in advocacy for reform -- "Be the change you want to see in the world." In Ryan's own words, "Adult advocates talk about the principles of youth development. We say that youth must be involved in programs, have real input into them and have their views respected and we must demonstrate that belief by making a commitment to bring youth into our own programs. Working with youth can be messy -- youth have needs, issues and problems that have to be dealt with if they are to be effective -- but the results are well worth the work and investment of resources."

Involving Youth in Making Change From Within the System

➤ State Advisory Groups

The Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention Act requires all states receiving formula grants under the act to establish a State Advisory Group (SAG). These SAGs are tasked with participating in the development and review of the state's juvenile justice plan and reviewing and advising on various aspects of the state's compliance with the requirements of the JJDP. The SAGs are required to have youth members – at least one-fifth of the SAG should be under the age of 24 – and to have at least three members who are or have been under the jurisdiction of the juvenile justice system¹¹

The slow appointment process and the timing and structure of meetings can make it difficult for youth, especially those just transitioning out of the juvenile/criminal justice system whose lives are in flux, to sustain a commitment to the regular SAG meetings. Some states have experienced difficulties in recruiting the full complement of youth members and retaining them, others have been more successful and provide useful guidance on how to recruit and retrain youth.¹² One model adopted by some states is

In Colorado, SAG youth members collectively are a formal committee within the Youth Advisory Committee (the State's State Advisory Group) and meet separately to discuss the projects for which they are responsible (the mini-grants). One of the youth serves as the chair of the youth committee and in that capacity sits on the executive committee, as do the chairs of the other committees, and provides updates of the youth committee work. All the youth, as full members of the council, also attend the full SAG meetings in addition to their committee meetings.

to provide mentors for the young people as they join the SAG who can guide them through the procedures, explain the context, and provide transportation to and from meetings to encourage attendance. Some states have found that youth are initially more comfortable meeting in separate youth groups which report their

¹¹ Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention Act of 2002, on line at http://njjn.org/media/resources/public/resource_234.pdf, page 14, Sec. 223(a)(3)iv and v

¹² Coalition for Juvenile Justice Newsletter, February 2007. http://www.juvjustice.org/newsletter_8.html#article_53

activities to the full SAG through a representative member. As the example of Colorado shows, the young people can be brought into full participation through this mechanism.

➤ Cook County's Juvenile Advisory Council

The mission of Cook County's Juvenile Advisory Council (JAC) is to create a forum for youth to assist the Probation Department in its efforts to assess the effectiveness of its present supervision and services; to better understand the needs of its clients; and to enhance its programming to meet those needs.¹³ JAC membership is open to all young men and women who have ever been involved in the juvenile justice system. Youth representatives are paid a stipend. The JAC runs orientations sessions for young people newly placed on probation and their families and exit interviews with young people leaving probation to find out what did and did not work. It then debriefs staff on the feedback so improvements can be made. Margie Chavarria was 13 when she entered the juvenile system on a burglary charge and later returned to detention on a probation violation. She didn't realize not going to school or running away from home were against probation. "We didn't have that orientation when I got on probation," she says. I'm proud to be participating with the JAC, because it's helping these kids understand what this program is all about.¹⁴ Deputy Steven Eisman, the council's staff coordinator values the youth perspective in decision making about programs and policies because it is driven by life experiences and keeps the county juvenile justice systems relevant to the needs of young people.¹⁵

Resources

Tina Chiu, *Bringing Youth Voices into Juvenile Justice Reform*. THE LINK: Connecting Juvenile Justice and Child Welfare, The Child Welfare League of America (Washington, DC: 2006)

Funders' Collaborative on Youth Organizing (2003). *An Emerging Model for Working with Youth: Community Organizing + Youth Development = Youth Organizing*, 9. New York, NY.

Lessons in Leadership: How Young People Change Their Communities and Themselves, Innovation Center for Community and Youth Development (Takoma Park, MD: 2003)

http://www.theinnovationcenter.org/register.asp?sect=Lessons_in_Leadership_exe_c.pdf

Young Community Mobilizers Share Strategies and Advice about Building Capacity in Under-Resourced Communities. The Forum for Youth Investment.

¹³ http://www.vera.org/publication_pdf/273_522.pdf

¹⁴ *Putting Youth at the Forefront of Detention Reform*, Insites, Annie E. Casey Foundation, Winter 2006
http://www.aecf.org/publications/data/06winter_connects.pdf

¹⁵ Celia Garcia, *Not Just Talk: Incorporating Youth Voice into Juvenile Justice Reform and Practice*, Connect for Kids, June 2006. <http://www.connectforkids.org/node/4351>

Young Leaders and Heroes: A Veteran Activist Talks About The Power of Youth Organizing. What Kids Can Do (2003).

<http://www.whatkidscando.org/featurestories/YOinterview.html>

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Building Bridges to Benefit Youth

The National Collaboration for Youth and National Juvenile Justice Network are partnering to strengthen connections between youth service providers and juvenile justice advocates. Vulnerable youth and families consistently transition between various publicly funded systems, from child welfare, community mental health, family support, special education and juvenile justice systems. Challenges abound, and youth frequently fail to receive the level of care and support they need. Moreover, a healthy youth development philosophy and approach should be applied to programming for all youth, regardless of the system in which they may find themselves. This initiative believes that the existing silos between programs, funding, and, in particular, advocacy, are counterproductive to the welfare of children and aims to break down those barriers. For more information, visit www.collab4youth.org/ncy/cjj.htm.

The National Collaboration for Youth (NCY), an affinity group of the National Human Services Assembly, includes 50 national, non-profit, youth development organizations. NCY's mission is to provide a united voice as advocates for youth to improve the conditions of young people in America, and to help young people reach their full potential. For more information, visit www.collab4youth.org.

The National Juvenile Justice Network (NJJN), which is hosted by the Coalition for Juvenile Justice, comprises 26 state organizations and coalitions that work for fair, equitable and developmentally appropriate adjudication and treatment for all children, youth and families involved in the juvenile justice system. For more information, visit www.njjn.org.

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