

Innovation Brief

Strengthening the Role of Families in Juvenile Justice

In 2007, Models for Change-Pennsylvania established a multidisciplinary workgroup—including both family advocates and juvenile justice practitioners—to address the role of families in the juvenile justice process. Despite the highly coordinated reform and oversight process in Pennsylvania’s juvenile justice system, there had never been a focus on the role of families. The concept itself was tenuous and poorly articulated, and the workgroup found no existing frameworks or research to guide them. Strategic outreach led to a new understanding of the factors that challenge and support family involvement in juvenile justice, and to the development of concrete tools and supports aligned with the philosophies of juvenile justice and family advocacy. Under the workgroup’s leadership, family involvement in juvenile justice has become a central principle of Pennsylvania’s juvenile justice system reform and has influenced the national discourse.

The Issue

Until the last few years, the nation’s juvenile courts had given little serious attention to achieving effective family involvement. Where the family role *had* been studied, it was as a factor contributing to a youth’s delinquency, a lens that was reinforced by the juvenile justice system’s core legal doctrine of *parens patriae*—the state as parent.

Family perspective. When the court is assigned both the legal and practical role of parent, families face a system in which they have little if any formal standing, yet are held accountable for their children’s rehabilitation, including costs and supervision. It is often a confusing and alienating experience, and families are frustrated when the critical information and insights they want to offer are overlooked or excluded.

Practitioner perspective. Juvenile justice practitioners do place value on family involvement and recognize the positive impact it can have on outcomes, especially during a child’s probation. But they too are frustrated by the lack of practical guidance and procedures for engaging families and making their roles effective and meaningful. There is a glaring need for the system-wide adoption of evidence-based strategies and services that support the family role at the levels of policy, planning, and working with the individual child.

A continuum of needs. Pennsylvania’s work has centered on the factors supporting and impeding family involvement from both the practitioner and family perspectives. Practice and policy must reflect the real needs of everyone involved, and must respond to the continuum of needs that families bring with them:

- All families need a basic level of supports that are based on respect, shared information, and authentic opportunities for input.
- Some families need additional supports that encourage trust and engagement with the process, and that provide additional help with their child.
- A few families find involvement significantly difficult; some are especially challenging, and their involvement might be detrimental to the child's supervision and treatment. Some of these families might be able to become involved, with the help of intensive services or support, but in other cases it might not be possible.

Innovations

In just a few years, the workgroup has moved from seeking ideas to producing practical tools to enhance family involvement.

Goals. The family involvement workgroup that convened in 2007 included both family advocacy and juvenile justice leadership. Together they committed to three overarching goals:

- Align with the philosophies of Pennsylvania's juvenile justice system and the state's family advocacy network.
- Integrate with ongoing system reform emerging from Models for Change-Pennsylvania.
- Design and implement a strategic model that authentically includes the voices of all stakeholders, advances evidence-based approaches, and produces measurable and sustainable change.

Themes and principles for family involvement.

After a year of intense meetings, the family involvement workgroup convened a series of focus groups of judges, probation officers, attorneys, providers, families, and youths, representing the geographic and cultural diversity of the Commonwealth. From the meetings and focus groups, they identified four consistent themes:

- Early intervention is essential to preventing involvement in the juvenile justice system.
- Respect should be the basis for all interactions between families and the system.

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- Court policy and practice must provide opportunities for family involvement.
- Leadership across agencies must ensure that state policies support family involvement.

In 2009 the family involvement workgroup produced a monograph, *Family Involvement in Pennsylvania's Juvenile Justice System*, explaining these themes and suggesting principles to guide the juvenile justice system in improving family involvement.

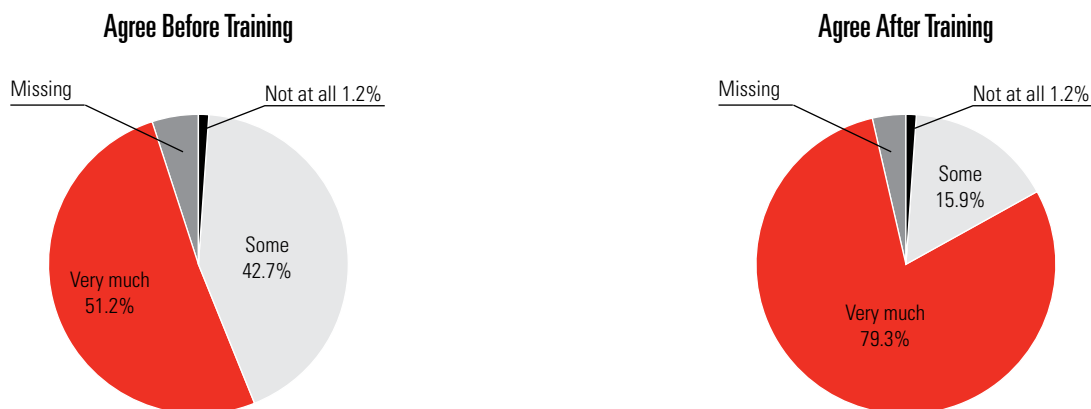
A guide for families. The families interviewed by the workgroup made it clear that they did not understand the juvenile justice process; they had many misconceptions about its purpose and the roles and responsibilities of the professionals they encountered. In response, the workgroup developed a guide for lay people. *A Family Guide to Pennsylvania's Juvenile Justice System* presents families with a clear idea of what to expect from the process and the people they will encounter, and describes how they can be effective partners and help their child lead a responsible, law-abiding life.

Building professional and community support.

In 2008, the Pennsylvania Council of Chief Juvenile Probation Officers added a new goal—developing a family involvement focus—in their Balanced and Restorative Justice Strategic Plan. The Council also made the workgroup a part of its advisory committee process. This was the first time in twenty years of reform that family involvement had been officially identified as an important area, and it allowed the workgroup to employ proven strategies to get buy-in from professionals in the field. The workgroup—now a Council committee—presented widely on the family involvement monograph, engaging a broad range of professionals to join the work of transforming the state's juvenile justice system. In 2011 the Family Involvement Committee held three well-attended regional forums, bringing together families, community leaders, family advocates, and juvenile justice representatives to informally explore issues around

Family Involvement Curriculum Assessment

Participants in the training responded to the statement:
“The benefits of family involvement in the court process outweigh the drawbacks.”



family involvement, showcase promising local practices, and identify needed local responses.

Practice resources for juvenile justice

practitioners. Through the Models for Change Mental Health/Juvenile Justice Action Network, the Family Involvement Committee developed a training curriculum for juvenile probation officers that is potentially of use in other states. The Family Involvement in Juvenile Justice Curriculum was piloted in 2011 at three sites representing rural, suburban, and urban juvenile demographics. Ninety-three juvenile probation department administrators, probation officers, and consultants such as psychologists from five counties participated. The curriculum is designed to give practitioners the understanding, skills, and tools they need to engage families, including those they find challenging. It is based on the premise that the field needs concrete family engagement tools, as well as an opportunity to explore the assets and biases that practitioners bring to their relationships with family. Assessments before and after the training documented statistically significant shifts in the participants' attitude across the pilots. The curriculum has now been incorporated into Pennsylvania's juvenile justice practitioner training at Shippensburg University.

Results and Lessons

The experience of the workgroup brought home that even experienced practitioners had a lot to learn about how much they didn't know. All participants saw how important it is to have authentic conversations among stakeholders, even

when such conversations are uncomfortable, and to come to the table without preconceptions. A willingness to listen and learn, along with skilled facilitation, proved to be invaluable. The Family Involvement Committee is recognized across Pennsylvania for generating an increased understanding of the family's perspective and the ways a family's involvement can be enhanced. This shift in perception brings with it broad support for the strategies the Committee is implementing through its monograph, curriculum, and family guide. Pennsylvania's Juvenile Justice System Enhancement Strategy, launched in 2010 to sustain Models for Change-Pennsylvania achievements following the grant, now identifies family involvement as one of its fundamental building blocks. Recommendations from the monograph, regional forums, curriculum, and pilots are being coordinated within the larger framework of systems change.

The work is also receiving national attention, including from the U.S. Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention (OJJDP). Georgetown University's Center for Juvenile Justice Reform (CJJR) published a research paper on family engagement in May 2011. The paper cited the Pennsylvania monograph, and resulted in a meeting between CJJR, family involvement experts, including a Pennsylvania representative, and U.S. administrative agencies that serve children, including OJJDP. For family involvement to become an enduring component of this nation's juvenile justice system, such federal focus is essential.

Looking Forward

In Pennsylvania. The Committee's attention is now focused on developing Juvenile Court Standards specific to family involvement for 2012, moving Pennsylvania closer to the principles and themes highlighted in the family involvement monograph.

As the system is able to demonstrate successes, effective family involvement will be sustained and brought to scale. Changing practice and policy will require a commitment to:

- Achieving better family engagement with the process, and linking that to improved outcomes for the child, the community, the victim, and the system.
- Engaging practitioners to look objectively at the underlying biases, skill gaps, and structures that prevent them from effectively involving families in the child's juvenile justice experience.
- Including families in the design, implementation, and assessment of approaches and models intended to engage them.

In other states. While Pennsylvania's family involvement work is designed to respond to this state's strengths and needs, the work is eminently adaptable to other states and communities. The training curriculum, for example, can be applied in other states and adapted to groups beyond probation officers.

In each state, family advocate and juvenile justice leaders should be recruited to lead the work, and states should identify existing resources—organizations and agencies, projects, grants, and initiatives in juvenile justice, child advocacy, and other areas—that can demonstrate and support family involvement and serve as models or foundations to build on. Evidence-based practices that are grounded in effective family involvement (such as Functional Family Probation, Multisystemic Therapy, and High Fidelity Wraparound) can serve as guideposts in these efforts.

Resources

Monograph: *Family Involvement in Pennsylvania's Juvenile Justice System* <http://www.modelsforchange.net/publications/238>

A Family Guide to Pennsylvania's Juvenile Justice System.
<http://www.modelsforchange.net/publications/344>

Safety, Fairness, Stability: Repositioning Juvenile Justice & Child Welfare to Engage Families & Communities; Pennell, Shapiro, Spigner, 2011 <http://cjjr.georgetown.edu/pdfs/famengagement/FamilyEngagementPaper.pdf>

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This brief is one in a series describing new knowledge and innovations emerging from Models for Change, a multi-state juvenile justice reform initiative. Models for Change is accelerating movement toward a more effective, fair, and developmentally sound juvenile justice system by creating replicable models that protect community safety, use resources wisely, and improve outcomes for youths. The briefs are intended to inform professionals in juvenile justice and related fields, and to contribute to a new national wave of juvenile justice reform.