



Amplifying Youth Voice and Partnerships

Background

Significant juvenile justice reform has taken place in Connecticut in recent years. However, amid these many advancements, we may have overlooked a critical stakeholder.

Connecticut's juvenile justice system does not currently have a place to actively listen to and partner with youth and to make changes guided by their input. National experts are now advising that juvenile justice reform must be centered around the voices and expertise of youth themselves in order to insure that these reforms have the best chance of being effective at changing behavior and improving family functioning.

This is about to change in our state as stakeholders, policy makers, practitioners and advocates have come to the realization that we must redouble our efforts to seek out and listen to young people and families involved in the juvenile justice system.

Youth Partnerships Matter

Many new positive youth development approaches represent a shift away from the view of youth as broken, dangerous and "problems to be managed". They propose a model change from thinking about positive youth development as the absence of negative or risky behaviors to a strength based model that focuses on fulfilling a youth's potential and giving them the opportunity to be a positive influence in the community.¹

The positive youth development philosophy is the foundation for the creation of the Youth Adult Partnerships (Y-AP) initiative, created to establish organizational spaces and opportunities where youth can participate meaningfully (i.e., not as tokens) in decisions that affect them. "Very few adults are accustomed to sharing power with youth, especially around issues of evaluation. This is not a put-down of adults, but rather a recognition that youth-adult partnership is not a normative practice in the United States."²



professionals. They should be active partners throughout the entire process.

A possible Youth Advocacy agenda may further the visibility of youth's contribution to statewide reform and highlight the talents and intellect of our youth. Policymakers can make this a priority by requiring youth partnerships on committees that are discussing solutions and ensuring youth are co-creating these solutions, While hearing their first hand experiences and stories is valuable and impactful, more is needed. An authentic partnership is critical.

“Community Impact just brought out some of my good qualities. Like, I’ve always been outspoken. But now I know how to speak out in a good way so that my voice can be heard...Now I can get a group of adults’ attention and get them to listen to me - conference with me - like a peer.”⁸



Youth Input – A beginning

As previously mentioned, the practice of engaging youth in a positive, developmental way around what's needed for youth to be successful in relation to Connecticut's juvenile justice system is just beginning. While we highlight a few successful activities below, we want to note that this is only a place to start. The New Role for Connecticut Youth – Leaders of Social Change Report done by the Perrin Family Foundation describes why there is no common or shared definition of youth-led social change.

The Center for Children's Advocacy has developed Speak Up, a 10-12 week advocacy training series for youth that teaches self and system advocacy skills. Youth participating in these cohorts have suggested school discipline policy changes in meetings with a superintendent, and suggested improvements to the foster care system that led to statutory changes.

In 2016, the Connecticut Juvenile Justice Alliance began an effort to engage youth in conversation. Its first foray into amplifying youth voice was an opportunity to get youth input around what is needed when the closure of the Connecticut Juvenile Training School (CJTS) is complete in 2018. A total of 40 youth, most of whom had spent time in CJTS, discussed what it would take for them to be successful. They made several strong recommendations around investments in mentors with experiences that mirror their own, job skill-building opportunities, exposure to new experiences and activities that allow them to find and build on interests, and eliminating racial and ethnic biases.

Many of their comments made by the youth in the CJJA project aligned with what we expected, but the youth raised housing insecurity as a much broader and nearly universal issue than we had known. When asked how they would redirect funds spent on them to be incarcerated, a surprising number of them mentioned buying a house, or paying of their family's mortgage as their first priority. CTJJA is increasing its focus on youth homelessness and intensifying partnerships with those working on this issue as a result of the wisdom of the young people who spoke with them.

Another initiative for involving youth and families directly into the reform process arises from the work of the Juvenile Justice Policy and Oversight Committee. The Tow Youth Justice Institute has contracted with FAVOR, an advocacy and support group for families whose children are involved in the behavioral health system, for stipends to fund parents to attend the JJPOC Work Group meetings. This will give parents a direct voice in the state's efforts to increase diversion, decrease recidivism and decrease incarceration.



Next Steps—We Need a Plan and Support

The conversation with youth and their families, while happening in some areas and with inconsistent approaches, needs to be prioritized, resourced, and amplified to incorporate their expertise and ensure relevant, specific planning for what they, their families, and their communities need in order to keep young people out of the juvenile justice system and confinement.⁹

“The term “partnership” reminds us that the engagement and voice of both youth and adults are critical.” Connecticut has had several great movements in engaging youth, but has not yet developed an overall, sustainable plan for amplifying youth voice in justice reform. The potential benefits from a long term plan are immense.

The Connecticut Juvenile Justice Alliance, FAVOR and the Tow Youth Justice Institute at the University of New Haven are three of the partners already in conversation, about developing a plan for involving youth in our collective efforts to improve the juvenile justice system. Other community partners, however, have ideas and practices to share and so we need to build a robust network of agencies and groups committed to the concept of youth and family involvement. It is likely that foundation funding will be explored to support this initiative. Interested parties should contact us at the TYJI to get involved in making this happen. Our reform efforts in the future should be demonstrably more effective at decreasing recidivism and increasing the overall wellness of children in our state if we effectively integrate the “youth voice” into our research and planning efforts.



This Issue Brief is a collaborative efforts of the Tow Youth Justice Institute and the Connecticut Juvenile Justice Alliance with special thanks to Hernan Carvente, National Youth Partnership Strategist at Youth First Initiative for his contribution to this brief and his ongoing work to amplify youth voice!

Footnotes

- 1.Literature Review, Model Programs Guide, OJJDP, August 2014
- 2.Act for Youth Center of Excellence, actforyouth.net, powerpoint, “Youth-Adult Partnership: Involving Youth in Decision Making”
- 3.Barriers to Wellness, Voices and Views from Young People in Five Cities, pg. 1
- 4.Safely Home, by Shaena M. Fazal, Esq. pg. 22
5. A New Role for Connecticut Youth, Leaders of Social Change, Laura McCargar, Perrin Family Foundation, in partnership with the Funders’ Collaborative on Youth Organizing, pg.8
6. A New Role for Connecticut Youth, Leaders of Social Change, Laura McCargar, Perrin Family Foundation, in partnership with the Funders’ Collaborative on Youth Organizing, pg. 13
7. <http://gradnation.americaspromise.org/>
- 8.Maximize the Diversity of Youth Researchers and Community Voices, Youth Mobilizer in TN.
- 9.Beyond Bars, Keeping Young People Safe at Home and Out of Youth Prisons, The National Collaboration for Youth, pg. 7

The Tow Youth Justice Institute is a university, state and private partnership established to lead the way in juvenile justice reform through collaborative planning, training, research and advocacy.

Please visit our website at newhaven.edu/towyouth and follow us on social media @towoyouth or call 203-932-7361 with questions or for more information.

