



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



While engaging youth in community research and policy reform is in its infancy stage, it is on its way to become a promising practice. The Center for Promise of America's Promise Alliance piloted a multi-site, youth-led assessment to inform future research approaches to youth justice reform. One participant spoke about the importance of the opportunity to be heard. "We're afraid to talk about our problems because we either feel like no one's listening, cares, or we don't want to seem inferior...It boils down to the environment, in my opinion. If we don't see more positivity around us we're likely to behave negatively, and in an already impoverished state of mind we act based off of survival." ³

Youth can be "start-up investors more likely to engage in activities and interventions they choose." ⁴ A system led by youth input requires a culture shift in how youth and adults engage with each other. Young people are, in fact, the experts in *their* lives. They wake up in the communities, are surrounded by their families, and have to engage with different systems on a daily basis. Youth are inspired when they can participate in ways consistent with their interests and skills. They do best when there are clear roles and know what is expected from them. They need time and coaching to prepare for these roles. These factors and more will ensure a positive experience for youth.



Who benefits when amplifying youth voice? Everyone.

In the report *A New Role for Connecticut Youth, Leaders of Social Change*, the authors eloquently point out some of the benefits that youth voices offer to the community. Their perspective:

- Exposes others to the unique perspective and insights of young people
- Challenges negative stereotypes and forges strong relationships between youth and adults
- Prompts systems changes and reforms, ensuring more equitable access to resources and opportunities

Young people who experience injustice often feel that the circumstances of their lives and communities are beyond their control. Youth-led social change encourages and supports youth as they take action to address that injustice. This is a long-term process that not only builds confidence, knowledge, and leadership skills, but also provides them an outlet to discuss the root causes of injustice and inequity in their lives and communities.

Youth-led social change seeks to transform not just the individual, but also the individual's family, community and, ultimately, society itself. "The active engagement of youth is essential for the healthy development of our young people and our communities." (S. Perin) Part of reforming the juvenile justice system is changing perceptions and biases within communities. A quality Y-AP will demonstrate that a solid plan is in place that reflects our youth's concerns and ideas, a key factor in the success of community-based alternatives. ⁵

Connecting the dots between youth voice and justice reform

For young people who have experienced oppression, inequity, or injustice, this heightened critical awareness serves as the primary launching pad for deep and meaningful civic engagement. ⁶ Our ultimate goal is to have youth and families become, feel, and be treated like full citizens, in spaces where there has not always been a place for them at the table. "Existing studies about engaging young people in research partnerships emphasizes that young people should be viewed as community assets with the right and responsibility to participate in decisions that impact their lives." ⁷ In order for youth, families and community members to have a true attachment to social change, they must be supported, respected, and heard as fully as politicians, policy makers and other



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.



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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.

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