

Engaging the Families of Youth Reentering Rural Communities

Introduction

Although the number of youth in out-of-home placements in the United States has been falling for decades, there are still nearly 40,000 youth living in residential placement facilities on any day (Hockenberry & Sladky, 2020). Most of these youth will return home. Their successful reentry depends on the presence of caring individuals, access to educational and employment opportunities, access to physical and behavioral healthcare, and many other supports and services. Young people who are returning to rural communities from out-of-home placements may face unique barriers to successful reentry, and rural reentry service providers may face challenges in meeting their needs. Despite these potential limitations, rural communities possess unique strengths that juvenile justice practitioners and service providers can leverage to support a successful reentry process for youth. Successful reentry requires planning that begins early in a youth's placement outside the juvenile justice system, partnerships with the young person and their family, and a focus on the unique strengths and opportunities provided by the community.

This brief focuses on the importance of family engagement in developing and implementing strong reentry plans for youth in custody. The brief provides an overview of family engagement and discusses how partnering with families is an essential component of reentry efforts in rural communities.

What Is Family Engagement?

Family involvement is essential at all touchpoints in the juvenile justice system, but it is especially important during reentry. The Children's Bureau defines family engagement as "Any role or activity that enables families to have direct and meaningful input and influence on systems, policies, programs, or practices affecting services for children and families" (Children's Bureau, n.d., 2017). In the juvenile justice system, family engagement can take many forms at both the individual and system levels, including involving families meaningfully in case assessment, planning, and ongoing case management processes; encouraging frequent visitation and communication between youth in custody and their families; and

including family members as advocates in the development of new policies or procedures. As the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services states, "Within juvenile justice, family engagement occurs when the justice system respects family members as partners and facilitates their ongoing participation in decision-making regarding the youth's rehabilitation."

Historically, some people have held the erroneous belief that system-involved youth only come from "dysfunctional" families and that their behavior will only improve if the youth is removed from their family environment. For decades, however, researchers have pointed to the positive impact that supportive family contact can have on people involved with the

legal system (Holt & Miller, 1972; Shanahan & diZerega, 2016). Those in the field have turned their attention to family engagement, recognizing that strong family connections are important for improving academic performance, supporting positive affect, and reducing negative behaviors among youth (Monahan et al., 2011; Villalobos Agudelo, 2013). Strong family connections also can reduce the prevalence and severity of reoffending (Winokur Early et al., 2013). The positive effect of family engagement runs contrary to the historical misconception that families are the root cause of youth delinquency.

In fact, families serve as a bridge between youth and their communities. For systems-involved youth, family support is essential for the youth's successful reentry into their families and communities. Families are also a tremendous source of information, and they can play an integral role in planning for reentry. For example, they can provide context about a youth's background and previous experiences with trauma and their strengths and areas of need. When families share this information with those who work closely with the youth, these personnel can tailor reentry services to meet the youth's individual needs. For these reasons, effective family engagement can bolster reentry efforts and set youth up for success once they return to their communities.

Four Key Components of Family Engagement

Broadly Defining Family

In the context of youth reentry, “family” should include anyone with whom the youth has a positive and stable relationship, such as parents (e.g., biological, adoptive, foster, and legal guardians), siblings, grandparents, mentors, teachers, and family friends. Family may include individuals related to the youth

through blood or marriage as well as “fictive kin”—people who are not related to a youth by birth, adoption, or marriage, but who have an emotionally significant relationship with the child and play an important role in supporting the youth's well-being (Eger, 2022). As staff from youth justice agencies and partners from other agencies and in the community prepare youth for reentry into their communities, they should identify those individuals on whom the youth can rely for support, safety, and encouragement. For example, in Ohio, several juvenile justice facilities successfully used the Juvenile Relational Inquiry Tool—a family engagement tool developed by the Vera Institute of Justice that comprises a series of open-ended questions—to help identify support systems for youth (Shanahan & Villalobos Agudelo, 2012). Juvenile justice agencies may also consider using family-finding technology or similar approaches to identify and help connect youth to family members and other important adults and promote the youth's well-being and development (e.g., <http://familyfinding.org>). Although such family-finding technology is more commonly used in child welfare systems, juvenile justice agencies can use it to help build strong connections to kinship networks, and, in particular, to relatives with whom the youth has had no previous or recent contact (Shanahan & diZerega, 2016). Directly asking youth who they trust or look up to can also help identify the multiple supports that already exist within their communities, such as neighbors, coaches, or mentors. Strong, supportive relationships with multiple caring adults and peers can enhance the reentry process for young people who are returning from secure confinement.

Encouraging Positive Youth-Family Connections

Effective family engagement in the youth reentry process begins well before youth are released from custody. Incarceration creates a significant barrier to family unity and support because it “separates adolescents from their home during a period of development when their sense of well-being and their coping skills are still highly influenced by parents and other family members” (Shanahan & diZerega, 2016, p. 3). Despite this, and to counter the detrimental impact of out-of-home placements, juvenile justice systems can make efforts to engage families in the reentry process. Strong reentry planning should begin at the time of system adjudication and/or disposition (e.g., commitment to the agency/facility). In addition, justice system staff should encourage families and youth—and also support them in their efforts—to sustain positive connections throughout their time apart. Juvenile justice staff should also work with families to help youth heal, and repair any harm to the community that the youth may have caused. After creating a broad definition of “family” and identifying supportive individuals, juvenile justice facilities can encourage and enable family involvement by maintaining flexible visiting hours, providing transportation for families who otherwise could not visit, and allowing youth to access alternate forms of communication. Phone calls and video chats should be free and available to all young people. This was of particular importance during the COVID-19 pandemic, when in-person visitation was often difficult or impossible. Although electronic communications (e.g., email) can be incredibly beneficial (both during a pandemic and even when there is no pandemic), they should supplement, and not replace, in-person

visitation. To promote planning for reentry, juvenile justice staff must also foster an environment that is conducive to regular, meaningful conversations between youth and the individuals who support them.

Including Families in the Assessment and Treatment Process

In order to shape truly collaborative partnerships with families, juvenile justice system personnel must include families in the assessment and treatment process. In the context of reentry planning, families play a crucial role in informing the most beneficial case plan that will support meeting the unique needs of their youth. When youth are returning from custody, families serve as the bridge that connects them to their communities and should be considered a partner in accessing necessary services. Parents and guardians should know their rights—and be empowered to exercise them—especially with regard to their child’s case plan. For example, parents should advocate for or against specific mental health treatments for their child, be involved in decisions related to their child’s education, and be active partners in the case planning process.

Caseworkers can also directly connect families to services and programming that address their needs, such as housing assistance, behavioral healthcare, or substance use treatments. These services should be voluntary and should not extend the abilities of agencies to control or punish children, youth, or families; rather, reentry workers should focus on supporting youth within their families and communities. Family-strengthening interventions, such as family skills training, multisystemic family therapy, and functional family therapy may also be effective tools for addressing maladaptive patterns or poor communication within families (Development Services Group, Inc. 2014).

Empowering Families To Transform Systems

When juvenile justice system staff and partners are making decisions about young people's autonomy and well-being—a right that is fundamental to being a parent—families should have a say in how these systems operate. Agencies have incorporated family input through a variety of mechanisms, such as designating family liaisons, regularly surveying families for feedback on facility practices and supports, or enacting a Parents' Bill of Rights, as the Texas Department of Juvenile Justice (TDJJ) did. The Parents' Bill of Rights is an example of empowering families to transform systems and including families in the assessment and treatment process. It codifies the rights of parents to advocate on behalf of their children. The Bill of Rights was developed in partnership with parents, youth, advocacy groups, and agency staff. (Shanahan 2016). To see the full bill of rights, visit:

https://www2.tjtd.texas.gov/programs/parents/billof_rights.aspx.

One parent-led organization, Family and Friends of Louisiana's Incarcerated Children, worked in partnership with the Juvenile Justice Project of Louisiana and was "pivotal in passing landmark legislation—the Juvenile Justice Reform Act (Act 1225). Passage of this act led to: (i) the closure of the state's Tallulah Correctional Center for Youth, a placement where youth experienced abusive treatment; (ii) a substantial reduction in youth incarceration; and (iii) new efforts to transform residential placements in the state" (Justice for Families, 2012). Their work, and that of family groups all over the country, demonstrates the power that families and parents can have in shaping the juvenile justice system.

Empowering Families To Transform Systems: Massachusetts Department of Youth Services (DYS) Family Advisory Council

The Massachusetts DYS established a Family Advisory Council to formalize family involvement in agencywide policymaking. The group includes four external members (family members of youth currently or formerly involved with the system) and four DYS staff members who are paired with the families as mentors. The Director of Community Engagement provides a tie-breaking vote. The group advises on policy and practice changes related to families and family involvement in DYS operations. Consider the following lessons from the Massachusetts DYS when embarking on creating a similar advisory council:

Establish transparent processes.

Collaboratively establish bylaws dictating the length of each term, structure/composition of the council, and the scope of the council's work. Discuss what the council's role will be and how it will operate.

Define family engagement. The council should agree on a definition of family engagement that can be used throughout its work.

Focus on racial equity. Thoughtfully navigate existing tensions and make racial equity and justice a core component of all work.

Consider the entire community. Members on the advisory council represent the entire community of system-involved youth and families, not just their own child's interests.

Family Engagement and Reentry in Rural Communities

Family engagement is equally important for juvenile justice agencies in rural jurisdictions, but these agencies may face unique barriers to adopting the traditional family engagement methods used by agencies in larger, urban areas. This is particularly true for helping to facilitate positive youth-family connections and including families in the assessment and treatment processes. Obstacles may include limited access to transportation and geographical distance barriers, limited specialized services or professional development opportunities for providers, and limited access to broadband and other technological barriers. A lack of public transportation and access to private transportation means that youth and families often cannot access supportive services and clinical care. Limited access to broadband may mean that alternative or multiple forms of communication are necessary to contact families, such as mail or phone calls to landlines.

Although rural communities may face unique challenges to family engagement, they also possess unique strengths that can make this endeavor not only possible but potentially a model for all jurisdictions. Rural communities may also have a strong local ethos that supports helping neighbors and other community members; well-established working relationships between community members and service providers across sectors; and a sense of pride in their community, culture, and history. Informal support networks, such as family, friends, and neighbors, might meet young people's needs in more personal and individualized ways than traditional service providers can.

These are examples of strengths that can be leveraged to provide opportunities for meaningful

family and community engagement during the reentry process. Because juvenile justice placements can isolate youth from their communities, connecting or reconnecting youth with supportive, prosocial individuals and opportunities should be a major focus of reentry. To facilitate these connections, agencies can partner with community organizations, such as youth-serving providers and faith-based organizations, who are already providing transportation in the community, or they can offer videoconferencing as a way to stay connected. They can also provide or fund transportation in flexible ways. For example, the Ohio Department of Youth Services (DYS) provides free transportation for families to all DYS facilities, while the TJJD appoints a family liaison who can assist family members in locating financial resources to cover transportation costs. These statewide initiatives are particularly beneficial for families who have to travel great distances. For all these reasons, it is important to include family representatives from rural communities when changing agencywide policy and practice.

Agency leaders and staff should also prioritize cultural competency among case workers and service providers. Trainings and resources, whether offered online or in person, should empower workers to deliver appropriate and affirming services for all youth, including youth who identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and questioning (LGBTQ+); tribal youth; youth with disabilities; and youth from other historically underserved populations. For more specialized needs, a "hub and spoke" model can be used to deliver services in the rural context. In the healthcare field, a hub and spoke model of care consists of "hub" facilities, which have the most resources and deliver more intensive and specialized services. These hubs reach out to "spoke" facilities, which are more numerous and dispersed but may be

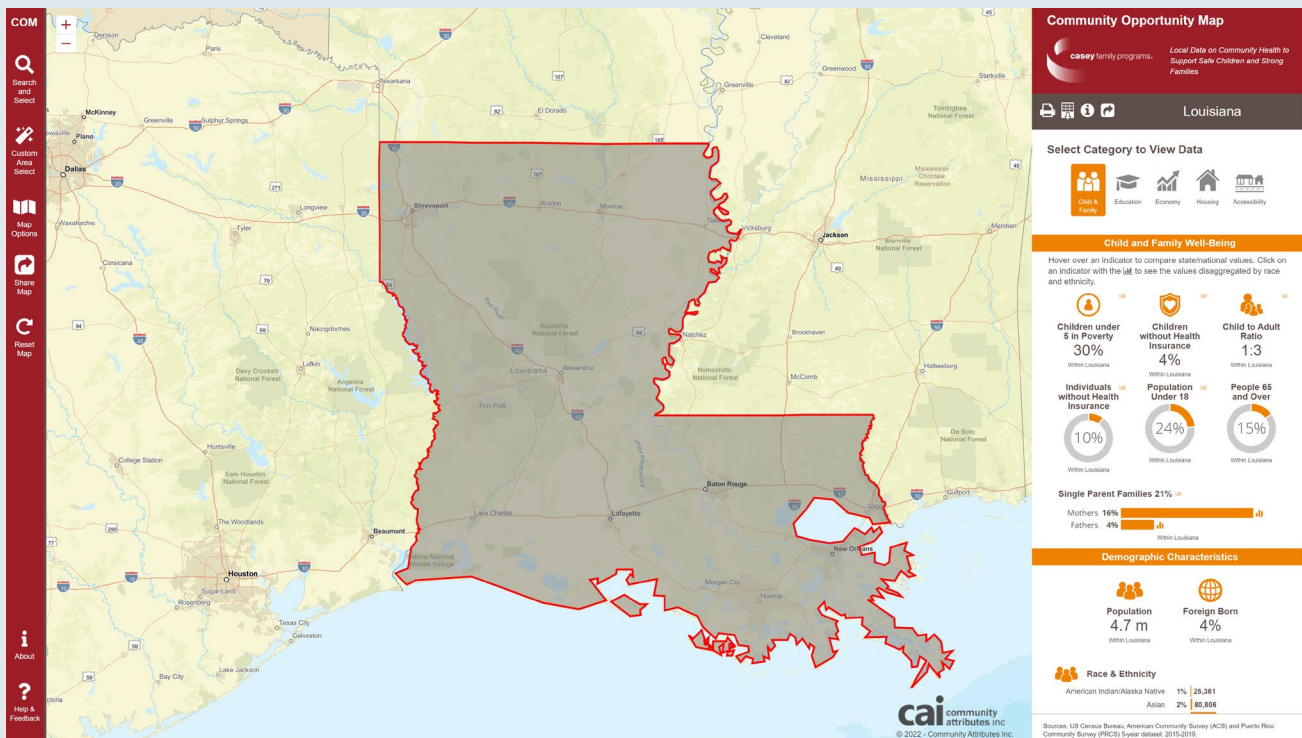
better equipped to address patients' more basic healthcare needs (Elrod & Fortenberry, 2017). This model can be effectively applied to a variety of services such as behavioral health or substance abuse treatment for youth in rural communities.

Developing strong personal and community relationships can go a long way toward addressing the unique needs of families in rural communities. System leaders and families

should use two-way communication. If system staff and partners commit themselves to listening to—and acting on—what families need and want, whether at a system or individual case level, they will greatly enhance the outcomes of the youth they serve. This commitment requires an acknowledgment by agency leadership and staff that families are the best source of information about the issues and challenges they face and they have valuable insights into how to solve these challenges.

Community Opportunity Map

To understand the specific strengths of rural communities and the challenges they face, reentry practitioners can use tools such as the Community Opportunity Map. Developed by Community Attributes Inc., for Casey Family Programs, this interactive tool displays publicly available community data on measures of child well-being. As Casey Family Programs states, “Ecological factors can pose risks to families (or act as benefits or protective factors) through such mechanisms as social support, economic distress, residential stability, lack of formal and informal community resources, and community norms related to parenting.” This information can help us understand the context of the rural communities within which families are living and to which youth are returning.



Source: Casey Family Programs. Community Opportunity Map. <http://communitymap.casey.org/>. Reprinted with permission.

Resources for Families: Ohio Department of Youth Services

The Ohio DYS website includes a searchable list of resources for families, including information about visitation, programming at specific facilities, youth telephone and commissary payments, and more. These resources, which are available online and in the DYS Youth and Family Handbook include the following:

- **CLOSE to Home Project (Connecting Loved Ones Sooner Than Expected):** This project provides free transportation to family members, including those in rural areas, of youth in DYS facilities.
- **Family Webcam:** The DYS' Release Authority allows family members of youth committed to the DYS to take part in online information sessions with their son or daughter's board contact. In these monthly sessions, family members can learn about the release processes and opportunities for their involvement. Family members can also ask questions of the Release Authority.
- **Parent Resource Guide:** This guide includes an overview of the DYS, including its mission and vision, the Release Authority, intake, facilities, alternative placements, and parole services. See: <https://dys.ohio.gov/wps/portal/gov/dys/youth-and-families/resources-for-families>

Utilization Tool: Questions To Ask Yourself

Effective family engagement involves delivering tailored approaches and services that meet the unique needs of youth and families. To this end, system staff and partners should explore pointed questions about families' strengths, needs, and wishes and directly partner with youth and families to shape policy and practice. Here are some questions to get this process started:

- How are families in this community currently meeting their own needs?
 - What services and supports are readily available (e.g., faith-based institutions, libraries, kinship networks, etc.)?
 - What nontraditional supports are currently available?
- Where are the gathering places for people in this community?
 - How can we meet families where they are (co-location of services, tele-services, etc.)?
- Who do parents, families, and youth trust?
 - Who do they turn to for advice or help with navigating the system?
 - What leadership opportunities exist for families of system-involved youth?
- What obstacles prevent families from getting involved in a youth's case (e.g., lack of access to transportation, lack of childcare, etc.)?
 - What do families say they need to overcome these barriers?
- What mechanisms currently exist for gaining and including families' insight on policy development?
 - Who is currently participating?
 - How can this be expanded to include more voices?

Conclusion

Family engagement—the practice of allowing families to have a meaningful impact on the systems, policies, and practices that affect them and their children—must be an essential part of juvenile justice practice. Not only are families experts in their own children’s unique strengths and needs, but they are also critically important partners in providing the safe, supportive environment necessary for youth to thrive. Intentional family engagement efforts should begin well before youth return to their communities; this is a practice of particular importance for successful reentry into rural communities.

Family engagement requires broadly defining “family,” encouraging positive youth-family connections, including families in the assessment and treatment process, and empowering families to transform systems. To be successful, all of these components must be brought to life through strong family engagement policies and practices. Although

rural communities may face additional challenges, such as distance and limited transportation, lack of specialized services, and limited access to broadband, they also possess unique strengths that can promote effective family engagement. There is no singular program or policy change that juvenile justice systems can make to effectively involve families in reentry, but they can begin by thoughtfully including family voices in every step involved in decision making. By making family engagement a priority in this way, systems are more likely to see better outcomes for youth, families, and communities, such as enhanced school engagement and performance, improved health and well-being, and reduced youth recidivism.

For more information about family engagement or rural reentry, please visit the official website of the [Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention](#) or the [Center for Coordinated Assistance to States Community of Practice](#) website.

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