

# Family Involvement in Pennsylvania's Juvenile Justice System

Family Involvement Subcommittee of the  
Mental Health/Juvenile Justice Workgroup for  
Models for Change-Pennsylvania  
and

Family Involvement Workgroup of the  
Pennsylvania Council of Chief Juvenile  
Probation Officer's Balanced & Restorative  
Justice Implementation Committee  
(Merged March 2009)



**ModelsforChange**  
Systems Reform in Juvenile Justice

Prepared for Models for Change-Pennsylvania by the collaborative efforts of the Mental Health Association in Pennsylvania and the Pennsylvania Council of Chief Juvenile Probation Officers, under the auspices of the Pennsylvania Balanced and Restorative Justice Implementation Committee, Family Involvement Workgroup.

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For additional information concerning the material in this report, contact:

Wendy Luckenbill

MHAPA-Mental Health Association in Pennsylvania

1414 North Cameron Street

Harrisburg, Pennsylvania 17103

717-346-0549

wluckenbill@mhapa.org

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## **Models for Change**

Models for Change is an effort to create successful and replicable models of juvenile justice reform through targeted investments in key states, with core support from the John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation. Models for Change seeks to accelerate progress toward a more effective, fair, and developmentally sound juvenile justice system that holds young people accountable for their actions, provides for their rehabilitation, protects them from harm, increases their life chances, and manages the risk they pose to themselves and to the public. The initiative is underway in Illinois, Pennsylvania, Louisiana, and Washington, and through action networks focusing on key issues, in California, Colorado, Connecticut, Florida, Kansas, Maryland, Massachusetts, New Jersey, North Carolina, Ohio, Texas, and Wisconsin.



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# Table of Contents

Introduction.....	5
A Timeline of Family Involvement Policy in Pennsylvania’s Juvenile Justice System .....	6
The Focus Group Process and Themes.....	7
Access to Effective Early Prevention and Intervention.....	8
Communicating Respect.....	10
Local Juvenile Justice System Policy and Practice.....	14
Juvenile Justice Statewide Leadership, Law and Policy.....	17
A Definition and Principles for Family Involvement .....	19
Resources .....	20
Members.....	21
Family Involvement in Pennsylvania Juvenile Justice Focus Group Hosts.....	23

# Introduction

**When children are involved with juvenile justice, the involvement of families is critical to a successful outcome. Yet, family involvement is frequently associated with negative rather than positive perceptions and relationships. Family and system partnership may be difficult, detrimental, or non-existent.**

This monograph will serve as the **beginning** of an important dialogue between all the partners – families, youth, victims and system professionals – as was the case with the development of the original Pennsylvania Balanced and Restorative Justice Monograph. Its purpose is to identify and develop strategies and models that will support family involvement in the juvenile justice system in effective and measurable ways and that are rooted within balanced and restorative justice practice. Subsequent efforts will expand upon the myriad of issues this monograph can only start to explore.

Perhaps more than any other at-risk group, youth in the juvenile justice system need meaningful relationships and supportive guidance from the adults in their lives. Everyone who has a personal stake in the healthy development of each child's life can and should play a role. The importance of family involvement before and during the juvenile justice experience is acknowledged within the system. **However, what has yet to be developed is the system-wide adoption of effective, evidence-based strategies and services that support the family role at both the individual child and the larger policy and planning levels.**

The importance of the role of families is clearly embedded in the foundational principles of Pennsylvania's juvenile justice system. Families' goals for their children echo both the goals set forth in Pennsylvania law as well as in this document. Families want their children to live in **safe communities**, to be appropriately **accountable** for their conduct, and to grow and develop into **competent** individuals.

This monograph arose under the direction of the Family Involvement Subcommittee of the Pennsylvania Models for Change, Mental Health/Juvenile Justice Workgroup. This subcommittee conducted a series of monthly full day discussion meetings from September 2007 to March 2008. Participants represented many stakeholders (judges, probation officers, attorneys, providers, families, and youth) and the geographic and cultural diversity of the Commonwealth.

These meetings were open, honest and sometimes included uncomfortable discussions on why family involvement in juvenile justice was important, and also why it was often difficult or seemingly impossible to achieve. In order to assure the broadest representation of stakeholder perspectives, the subcommittee commissioned a series of focus groups to be conducted across the state. The focus group findings underscored the issues with which the subcommittee grappled, as they sought to define and address the concept of family involvement. Those focus group findings have been the foundation of understanding for the subcommittee's deliberations to create a definition of family involvement in the juvenile justice system and principles of family involvement in juvenile justice.

It is the hope of the subcommittee that these ideas and suggestions will benefit *both* those charged with governance of the juvenile justice system *and* those whose lives come under that purview.



**Wendy Luckenbill, Chair**

Family Involvement Subcommittee of the  
Mental Health/Juvenile Justice Workgroup for  
Models for Change-Pennsylvania  
and  
Family Involvement Workgroup of the  
Pennsylvania Council of Chief Juvenile  
Probation Officer's Balanced & Restorative  
Justice Implementation Committee  
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# A Timeline of Family Involvement Policy in Pennsylvania's Juvenile Justice System

## 1995

Act 33 of 1996 was enacted and established Balanced and Restorative Justice as the operational principles of Pennsylvania's Juvenile Act.

## 1997

Pennsylvania's juvenile justice leaders implemented a juvenile justice reform process based on Balanced and Restorative Justice principles with publication of the monograph, *Balanced and Restorative Justice a New Mission and Changing Roles within the Juvenile Justice System*. The original monograph included the "Parent/Guardian" as one of the four parties identified as responsible for the implementation of Balanced and Restorative Justice.

## 1998

The Pennsylvania Commission on Crime and Delinquency (PCCD), Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention Committee adopted *Guiding Principles*. These principles commit to "... define and determine the functioning of Pennsylvania's juvenile justice system..." and represent "...beliefs...that should shape... relationships forged with victims, offenders and their families and the general public." The principles go on to describe the responsibilities of the juvenile justice system to "encourage and support ... families..." in supporting their child's rehabilitation and court related responsibilities.

## 2006

Under the Models for Change-Pennsylvania initiative, two of the three state level Targeted Areas of Improvement (TAI) identified family involvement as critical to this reform process:

- The Aftercare Workgroup survey of Pennsylvania's county Juvenile Probation Offices, *Summary of Current Aftercare Practice*, identified "family issues" as posing the greatest barrier to seamless reintegration when a youth returns home from a juvenile justice placement.

- The Mental Health/Juvenile Justice Workgroup produced a *Joint Policy Statement*, a formal commitment to increasing family involvement while improving the coordination between the mental health and juvenile justice systems by 2010 and which was signed by advocacy, juvenile justice, mental health, child welfare, drug and alcohol, and education state leadership.

## 2007

The Models for Change-Pennsylvania Mental Health/Juvenile Justice Family Involvement Subcommittee was convened to address the family involvement goal within the Mental Health/Juvenile Justice Joint Policy Statement:

### **Family Involvement**

21. Families engage with all relevant child-serving systems in the development and implementation of comprehensive treatment and aftercare plans for their children.
22. All services are child-centered, family focused, community-based, multi-system and collaborative, culturally competent and offered in the least restrictive/intrusive setting as possible, and these Child and Adolescent Service System Program (CASSP) principles are followed in all treatment planning and implementation.

## 2008

The Pennsylvania Balanced and Restorative Justice Implementation Committee reviewed and revised their original *Strategic Plan*, adding a new goal:

*Goal: #4 To develop a family involvement focus within the balanced and restorative justice model*

The Committee gave responsibility for Goal # 4 to the Models for Change-Pennsylvania Mental Health/Juvenile Justice Workgroup, Family Involvement Subcommittee, and made the subcommittee an official workgroup of the Committee.

## 2009 and Forward

This monograph is the first in a series of efforts that are planned in response to the Balanced and Restorative Justice Implementation Committee and Models for Change-Pennsylvania family involvement goals.



# The Focus Group Process and Themes

*“...the most important people in my life are my family; they are all I have.”*

—Youth, focus group participant

*“We need to do a better job of communicating to families that we really are here to help them.”*

—Juvenile Probation Officer, focus group participant

## Engaging Many Voices

A series of sixteen focus groups with over 200 participants was convened over nine months from May 2008 to November 2009. (See page 23 for a full focus group list.) The volunteers who agreed to participate in the focus groups were grouped by their role in the juvenile justice system and represented the ethnic, cultural, economic, and geographic diversity of the Commonwealth. Three family groups were convened with the assistance of family advocates in Philadelphia, Pittsburgh, and Huntingdon County. Two youth groups met, one in Pittsburgh and one in Beaver County. The other focus groups included juvenile court judges, juvenile probation officers, detention center administrators, residential and community service providers, adolescent psychologists and psychiatrists, aftercare specialists and juvenile defenders.

The focus group discussions covered a wide range of topical areas, each designed to elicit responses, based on the personal and professional experiences of the participants. Family members had children with extensive juvenile justice experience, and most youth had been placed in juvenile justice and mental health facilities. Juvenile justice participants had worked in the field for extended time, most for more than a decade. Questions were asked in an interactive setting where participants were free to speak openly with others who shared similar experiences. While all views of the participants were captured, there were areas that were remarkably consistent across all groups.

Several common themes emerged consistently across the focus groups. These themes aligned closely with the Family Involvement subcommittee discussions.

## The Common Themes

### ■ **Availability and Access to Effective Early Prevention and Intervention:**

The lack of early, accessible, responsive and effective prevention and early intervention services in the community is a clear precursor to future involvement in the Juvenile Justice system.

### ■ **Communicating Respect:**

Respect, as a core operational principle within juvenile justice, should be the basis for all interactions between families and the system, and can be the path to genuine partnerships on behalf of the involved youth.

### ■ **Juvenile Court Policy and Practice:**

Local juvenile justice system leaders and practitioners should ensure that opportunities exist for proactive and effective family involvement and are provided at each stage of a youth's involvement in juvenile justice.

### ■ **Statewide Policy and Oversight:**

Pennsylvania juvenile justice leadership across agencies and departments should examine current juvenile justice law, regulation, training and policy to eliminate barriers to and increase capacity for proactive and effective family involvement.

# Access to Effective Early Prevention and Intervention

***“Every group, agency and civic organization in every community needs to step up to the plate and make itself and services available to every kid and family who needs help BEFORE it’s too late.”***

—Juvenile Probation Officer, focus group participant

## Lack of Early Help Engenders Alienation for All

Family participants in the focus groups and family members of the Family Involvement Subcommittee all identified that lack of access to early and effective services frequently results in youth becoming involved in the juvenile justice process. This history of difficulty in accessing effective community services and supports can negatively affect the way families interact with systems, including juvenile justice. Lack of trust and a sense of futility replace earlier willingness to engage with resources and systems. After years of such experiences, families can bring a justifiable feeling of alienation and victimization to encounters with juvenile justice staff.

Likewise, juvenile justice staff carry with them the frustrations from their encounters with families who appear unwilling to engage in what the staff and Court see as the families’ responsibilities towards their children. A family who appears resistant and angry is discouraging to the staff who is charged with engaging them in a

restorative plan for their child. A family’s lack of success with prior system efforts can be interpreted as a history of uncooperativeness and even pathology on the part of family members. Juvenile justice staff is at risk of carrying a feeling of alienation and yes, victimization, after they meet with repeated distrust and hostility from the families with whom they are trying to engage.

Thus, the lack of early responsive services results in poor outcomes for the child and, and also, poor outcomes for family and system partnerships.

There is one other partnership that is negatively impacted by a lack of early and effective help to children, and that is the partnership between the family and their child. The negative impact to the relationship between the child and family can be substantial, with both ending up alienated from each other. Across focus group participants, it was noted that a family could view their child’s time in out of home placements as a much needed respite. Families may be simply exhausted by the time the child has reached the level of juvenile justice involvement. Youth who have not had their needs met by previous interventions and the best, if insufficient, efforts of their families can see that failure in an unsympathetic light, particularly where a juvenile justice staff steps in to “rescue” the child from the apparent chaos and negative influences.

## Need for Effective and Early Supports

Virtually every family member who participated in focus groups discussed the myriad of problem behaviors exhibited by their children before they were arrested and referred to juvenile court. Families described unaddressed learning problems and subsequent social and behavioral problems, undiagnosed mental health needs, experimentation with substance use, and engagement in risky and ill-considered actions that frequently began during elementary school. Youth described being scapegoated by school personnel, rather than helped when they were having problems, and bullied by their peers, while the same personnel turned a blind eye or even gave covert support to the harassment.

Families discussed their frustration and sense of hopelessness when told nothing could be done to help their child. **Rather than finding “No Wrong Door,” they found “All Wrong Doors.”** Despite more than twenty years of children’s system reform work in Pennsylvania, and the reasonable and even extraordinary efforts of families, children are still falling through the cracks.

## Recommendations for Preventing Juvenile Justice Involvement

**The juvenile justice system should collaborate with local and state prevention programs, partnerships, and coalitions including families and family advocates to:**

- Continue its commitment to developing and providing early intervention and prevention programs that are centered on the benefit of family involvement and are outcomes- and evidence-based.
- Identify, develop, and sustain evidence-based programs such as Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports and Anti-Bullying Programs in schools and Nurse Family Partnerships and Communities That Care in the community.
- Engage with the community to reinforce the value of evidence-based programs and practices that support children’s wellness and resiliency through positive, competency-based supports and interventions.

# Communicating Respect

***“We should adhere to ‘the Golden Rule’ by treating families with dignity and respect.”***

—Chief Juvenile Probation Officer, focus group participant

Open, honest, transparent and unambiguous communication or the perceived absence of it between family members and juvenile justice system personnel was **the** predominant issue raised during all of the focus group discussions. Respect, or lack of it, originates in how we communicate with each other. Focus group members, particularly those from families directly impacted by the juvenile justice system, described experiencing confusion, fear and alienation. Several perceived that system professionals viewed them as the source of responsibility for their children’s actions. Families described being “*talked to*” rather than “*talked with*”. They described personal situations in which little, if any, communication with system personnel occurred from the time of their initial contact with law enforcement. Throughout the process, family members described a time of confusing and conflicting or even missing information. In summary, family members described feeling “clueless” about an often confusing series of events and people in their children’s lives.

## A Foundation of Respect Among All

***All families will act in the best interest of their child, and fulfill their role, when they have the knowledge, skills and supports necessary to provide ongoing and developmentally appropriate guidance and interaction.***

—From Principles of Family Involvement in Juvenile Justice

Involving families in the juvenile justice process needs to be based in respect for their role as caretaker and the knowledge and relationship that is central to that role. It is critical for the juvenile justice system to ensure that all families are given the opportunity to engage in a mutually respectful relationship with juvenile justice staff. For families to convey respect and collaborate effectively, *they must believe they are in turn respected and valued*. Where families are unable or unwilling to respect the juvenile justice system and its representatives, effective partnership is unlikely. **Everyone, families and**

**staff alike, must have the tools, information and skills sufficient to support a respectful and effective partnership on behalf of each youth.**

## A System to Get Lost In

In many instances, there was no single point of contact to inform family members about the status of their child. Some parents were apparently unaware of the physical location of their child. In many cases, parents and family members stated they were confused as to what to expect or how juvenile probation and juvenile court proceedings were to be conducted. Often, family members perceived assigned defense counsel as either choosing to ignore them or preferring to marginalize parents in order to prepare a vigorous defense on behalf of their client. Few were told about the intended mission and goals of the juvenile justice system or how to navigate the various on-going processes inherent in the system. In several instances, there was little or no information other than a formal letter from either the juvenile probation department or another agency informing family members of an upcoming interview or hearing.

The anecdotal experiences described by participants paint an image of a juvenile justice system either overly burdened, with family involvement not regarded as part of its mission, or simply lacking sufficient resources to build and sustain effective and ongoing communications with family members of juveniles involved with the system. Regardless of the reasons, if the system is to fully manifest its commitment to respect, families must receive the same deference that is expected towards all the other stakeholders. There needs to be practice and policy in place to ensure that families have the information they need to participate effectively in their child’s planning and rehabilitation. Moreover, for the system itself, finding ways to include families in its policy, planning and oversight will not only demonstrate respect but will improve its responsiveness and effectiveness.

## The Family Peer Advocate

One suggestion that is being developed and supported in Pennsylvania and other states is the establishment of a Juvenile Justice Family Peer Advocate. Although still in development stages in several jurisdictions, the role of this specialized service is to provide assistance and guidance from someone who is a peer, and who can help the family navigate the child serving systems (specifically the juvenile justice system). This practice builds on the Family Peer Advocacy model that emerged from the Children's System of Care research and the Family Advocacy Movement that originated in the 1980's. Family Peer Advocates support families to acquire the knowledge and skills needed to effectively partner with the child serving systems on behalf of their children. There are 30 counties in Pennsylvania that currently support a Family Peer Advocacy project, and all provide cross-system support to families. Two counties have developed juvenile justice-specific family peer advocacy services.

## Chester County, Juvenile Justice Family Advocate

The Family Advocate works within the larger Chester County Children's System of Care project and provides support and advocacy to families who have children involved with the Juvenile Probation Office. Duties include:

- Collaborating and building supportive relationships with family members, system providers, and county staff.
- Providing direct advocacy to family members by offering telephone support, education and information, referral information and by accompanying families to meetings as appropriate and necessary.
- Assisting families in understanding and navigating all child serving systems, including child welfare, mental health, juvenile justice and the education system.

## Philadelphia County, Parents Involved Network

In Philadelphia, the Mental Health Association in Southeast Pennsylvania's Parents Involved Network (PIN) family peer advocacy staff provide several services orientated to the juvenile justice system.

- PIN has been invited by the Juvenile Court to have a presence in the Court's waiting room. There they meet with interested families prior to their children's hearings, and are able to provide families with information about the juvenile justice process, how to effectively advocate for their child, and what resources are available to support that advocacy including information about the all the child serving systems.
- Through that work, PIN has been invited to present to Philadelphia's juvenile probation officers on the family perspective, and how the officers can more effectively partner with families on behalf of their children.
- PIN designed and presents ongoing family training on effectively navigating the child serving systems. These trainings are presented by systems representatives, including juvenile justice. PEAK (Parent Empowerment Advocacy & Knowledge) is offered in six-week sessions across the city, and always has a waiting list of families eager for this service.

## Transportation

Respect, or conversely disrespect, for the family's role is conveyed by how the system ensures that the family is part of their child's rehabilitation. Participants identified the critical need for routine and regular visitation by family members with children in placement. All participants in the discussions expressed frustration with the barrier to communication and partnership that is presented by lack of transportation for families, despite a long held system belief that regular family visitation is an essential component of effective rehabilitation and aftercare planning.

Often, efforts by local jurisdictions and facilities to support family visitation are short-sighted at best. Even when support such as chartered buses and reimbursement for travel expenses are made available, they may not be used extensively. Families often cannot use these services because they do not accommodate the personal demands of their lives including care for the other siblings, wear and tear on vehicles, and the logistical and physical demands of traveling, especially because their children are frequently placed far from home. Planning meetings and therapy are difficult or impossible to schedule on weekend visits, which may be brief and painful. Families often leave without any resolution to the problems that brought their child to out of home placement, and without any strategies for improving the situation when the child returns home.

## Reducing the Transportation Barrier

- Every effort should be made to support timely and appropriate visitation by family members during their child's out of home placement.
- Family visitation should not be used as reward or punishment but should be regarded as an essential and necessary tool for effective intervention and treatment.
- Family-centered practices should be part of visits, with access to supports, information, and partnering relationships with staff.
- Where family visitation is not possible, flexible alternatives should be developed with family input, such as video conferencing and local meetings with clinical and probation staff.

***“Technology can’t hug a child”  
(in response to suggestion that  
family/child visits could be increased  
through use of teleconferencing).***

—Psychiatrist, focus group participant

# Recommendations for Building Respect through Communication

***“When we start with a position of partnership (with families), it works much better.”***

— Juvenile Probation Officer, focus group participant.

**Local jurisdictions should identify and promote family involvement and engagement practices and processes, which support communication between families and the juvenile justice system.**

- At the systems level these could include system/ community advisory groups (County Children’s Interagency Service Planning Committees, Communities That Care, System of Care/Children’s Reform Grants).
- At the individual family level, such practices include Family Group Decision Making, Restorative Conferences, Multi-Systemic Therapy, Functional Family Therapy, Therapeutic Foster Care, and High Fidelity Wraparound.
- Locally grown promising practices include programs that stakeholders, including families, have identified as effective in supporting their involvement in the juvenile justice process and include Family Peer Advocates and family educational projects (i.e., PEAK in Philadelphia and the Family Intervention Center in Mercer County).

**Local jurisdictions should engage existing groups that support family involvement (and include family members) to assist them in identifying, adapting and/or developing materials for families which:**

- Explain the goals and mission of the juvenile justice system.
- Identify and explain local juvenile justice innovative practices and projects including diversion, youth aid panels, and drug/mental health courts.
- Describe the local juvenile process and responsible parties, from the time of arrest through detention, intake, adjudication, disposition, placement and aftercare.
- Identify resources and services for families.

**Local jurisdictions should (with family and family advocate input) review (and revise where needed) their current policies and practices and identify where opportunities for family involvement can be strengthened. This includes the following:**

- At each decision-making point, there is an opportunity for the family to have meaningful, informed and authentic input.
- Families have access to resource people who can support their involvement, including family peer advocates.
- Juvenile justice staff receive family involvement and engagement training and resources.
- Especially where partnership between families and the system is difficult, balanced and restorative practices such as restorative conferences and Family Group Decision Making are made accessible.
- A process is in place for all families with youth involved in the juvenile justice system to provide input regarding their experiences and to evaluate, from their perspective, the capacity of the system to support their involvement.

# Local Juvenile Justice System Policy and Practice

It became clear during focus group discussions that local juvenile court customs and practices vary widely across jurisdictions, and also within each jurisdiction, and are influenced by local culture and the juvenile justice system's experience, judicial philosophy, leadership and traditions. For families to be part of the planning for the treatment and rehabilitation of their child, practices and policies must be in place to support that involvement. In several instances, family focus group participants felt as if juvenile justice staff blamed them for their child's problems. Families believed their opinions and insights regarding their child were often not welcomed. Many felt as if they were often marginalized throughout the process, and their concerns and contributions treated dismissively.

## The Family Lens

Families want to partner with and be respected by juvenile justice officials. They want to be regarded by the juvenile justice system as partners and resources, rather than extraneous, burdensome obstacles or even co-conspirators.

Comments from family focus group participants highlighted the impact that approaches and attitudes can have in building partnerships and fostering respect. Families' experiences varied not only from family to family, or by cultural or socio-economic differences but often from one encounter within the system to another, regardless of the severity of their child's offense.

Families reported that personnel could be:

### Respectful and collaborative:

*"My daughter's probation officer really cared about her."*

*"He always kept us in the loop."*

*"He made us feel like a real partner throughout the entire process."*

*"She treated me with respect."*

*"He was always honest and upfront about everything."*

### Or dismissive and alienating:

*"He always treated me as [if] I was to blame for everything."*

*"I felt as if I was a criminal and he was a cop."*

*"He talked down to me, blamed me, and made me feel worthless."*

*"I sensed that he just didn't care about my concerns."*

*"There was absolutely zero contact or communications with me."*

## The Local Juvenile Justice Lens

The juvenile justice system focus group participants expressed similar concerns for urgency in understanding the value of effective family involvement throughout the juvenile court experience. There was consensus that parents are too often – and unfairly – blamed for the current situation they face with their child's arrest and system involvement. Many pointed out multiple occasions when families and parents have too quickly and easily become a scapegoat and the source of misplaced scorn or even ridicule. Most voiced strong support for the field to move away from what they perceive as "a law enforcement mentality."

They offered suggestions on how to improve relationships with families whose children are involved in the system including:

- Begin all family relationships with open and honest communications.
- Seek true and meaningful partnerships with family members by collaborating with them and seeking their insights and perspectives.
- Express patience and understanding toward family issues.
- Seek ways to actively engage and involve families in positive ways, including assisting families to identify and access supports and interventions.



## Ending “The Blame Game” Through Research Based Approaches

It should not be surprising that the most effective interventions, with the greatest outcomes for youth and families involved in the juvenile justice system, are those that view family members as partners and collaborators. It is especially noteworthy that these research-based approaches reject the assignment of blame to anyone, particularly family members. Instead, working together, trained facilitators and professional therapists collaborate in partnership with family members in addressing critical areas of concerns and creating strategies grounded in strengths and shared by everyone in the youth’s life. (Aos, Drake, Miller, 2006)

### Treatment Partnerships

Functional Family Therapy (FFT) and Multisystemic Therapy (MST) are on all lists of nationally published evidence-based model programs, and are supported by Pennsylvania’s Commission on Crime and Delinquency and Department of Public Welfare. Both of these interventions are designed for youth already in the juvenile justice system and involve the entire family. The availability of both programs has proliferated across the state, and in 2008 they were included within the state’s mental health service array.

### Planning Partnerships

Family Group Decision Making (FGDM) is a promising practice that is emerging throughout the Commonwealth. Preliminary reports indicate that the model is proving successful. It adheres to the principles of restorative justice; accepting responsibility, understanding the impact of the crime on those who have been harmed, and taking responsibility for the reparations and the provision of support for the prevention of future delinquent behavior. FGDM gained a foothold in Pennsylvania through statewide roundtables initiated through the Permanency Practice Initiative of the Pennsylvania Supreme Court. This initiative led by Supreme Court Justice Max Baer has selected FGDM as a primary practice focus of the Dependency Court Improvement Project.

Although initiated through the dependency system, juvenile courts are realizing the benefit of this restorative practice for youth and families involved in the delinquency system. FGDM recognizes the importance of directly involving youth, family, extended family groups and other supportive individuals in a decision making process which ultimately results in a comprehensive case plan that addresses family concerns as well as those of the court.

## A Locally Grown Program that Partners

In 1993, multiple agencies and groups in Mercer County, a rural county in western Pennsylvania took action. Community leaders came together through the leadership of the juvenile court. By partnering with school districts, community agencies, non-profit groups and businesses, they established the Neighborhood-based Family Intervention Center. Its mission is “to empower the families of delinquent youths referred by the courts, through intensive, in-home, community-based intervention strategies.”

Numerous structured activities and opportunities for meaningful and on-going family involvement are offered, including development of a “Family Prescription” in collaboration with family members, agency personnel and involved youth. As part of the family prescription, everyone participates in an overnight retreat – mothers, fathers, and other family members together with their child who is under the supervision of the juvenile court.

One formerly reluctant mother summarized the experience in writing:

***Let me first tell you that I did not want to go. In all actuality, I was probably one of the most difficult parents about going. I even went to such lengths as getting a doctor’s excuse not to attend. . . I finally broke down and went. I was very surprised at how much I gained from the experience and I learned things about my daughter that I didn’t know.***

***The real prize for me was seeing how much my daughter enjoyed our time together. I then realized that even though she gives me a hard time, she really does love me. . . This program is excellent, and the staff at Neighborhood Base put such a valiant effort into this retreat. . . I would recommend this experience for all parents, not only do you bond with your child, but you also gain knowledge about strengthening your family.***

***It was truly a rewarding experience.***

## Recommendations for Increasing Family Involvement at the Local Level

**County-based juvenile court system stakeholders, including the juvenile court administrative judge and chief juvenile probation officer, in partnership with those receiving juvenile justice services (families, youth, and the broader community) should examine the current philosophy, customs and practices regarding effective, meaningful family involvement and its importance to the local juvenile justice system. Suggested measures for assessing the effectiveness of family involvement include the following:**

- Family members are treated with respect and dignity by juvenile justice system professionals.
- Families are considered important to ensuring successful outcomes for youth.
- Family members are actively sought out and their views, insights, and experiences are valued and utilized.
- Information is regularly provided to families from the time of initial contact – arrest, detention, intake, hearings, disposition and placement, and is provided in a variety of means which respect families’ cultures, experiences, and needs.
- Family members have a single point of contact within the local juvenile justice system that they can rely on to provide open, honest and up-to-date information regarding their child.
- Information is made available to family members through brochures, resources, or other materials that describe the mission, goals and expectations of the juvenile justice system.
- Families are referred to self-help resources including local and state level family peer advocacy projects.
- Professional training courses or other resources available to professional staff include information on family systems, communications skills, and family involvement.
- Families are included in planning activities associated with the care and treatment of their child, and the plans address the needs of the family to support their child, as identified by the family.
- Family members are routinely included in all decisions regarding their child, all planning meetings, and ongoing monitoring. Their input is valued and reflected in the plan, and they come to the table with sufficient knowledge and skills to support their effective involvement.
- When a youth is in out-of-home placement, regular communication, visitation, and transportation is provided or arranged for family members.
- Aftercare planning for a youth in placement includes a “family plan” that is developed in partnership with the family.
- Family centered resources and programs, such as Functional Family Therapy, Multi-Systemic Therapy, or Family Group Decision Making are currently available, or plans are underway to make them available in a jurisdiction.

# Juvenile Justice Statewide Leadership, Law and Policy

***“We must keep in mind that we need to work within the parameters of the Juvenile Justice System – we can’t lose sight of that.”***

—Chief Juvenile Probation Officer,  
focus group participant

Family involvement practice and policy is not new to the children’s system of care. However, as noted, juvenile justice systems, both in the Commonwealth and nationally, have not widely adopted family centered and driven practices. This is because of the unique legal responsibilities the system has, not only to the youth and family but also to the victim and the community. Partnering, which entails a sharing of power with the family and an acknowledgment of the family as the primary decision maker, can be at conflict with what the Court and juvenile probation must consider for all impacted parties.

**A serious question for this discussion is: How do we preserve the necessary legal authority of the system and still proceed in a balanced and restorative process that values and respects the role of the family?**

## **Pennsylvania – A Model in the Nation**

Because of its reputation as a national leader in juvenile justice, in 2004 Pennsylvania was selected as the first state to participate in the Models for Change initiative funded by the John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation.

As one of the core states in Models for Change, Pennsylvania has continued its leadership in fine-tuning the juvenile justice system. An important outgrowth of Models for Change

in Pennsylvania has been a focus on the issue of family involvement. In 2007, all three Targeted Areas of Improvement, **Aftercare, Disproportionate Minority Contact, and Mental Health/Juvenile Justice** joined together for the first time to address this issue with the convening of the **Models for Change-Pennsylvania** Family Involvement Subcommittee. In 2009, the Pennsylvania Council of Chief Juvenile Probation Officers’ Balanced and Restorative Justice Implementation Committee adopted this subcommittee as the Family Involvement Workgroup, now charged with implementing its strategic plan goal on family involvement.

## **2008 Pennsylvania Balanced and Restorative Justice Strategic Plan:**

*Goal #4: To develop a family involvement focus within the balanced and restorative justice model.*

Commitments like this at the State level are critical to the sustainability of these important efforts. The Balanced and Restorative Justice Implementation Committee, formed more than a decade ago, has a history of identifying, developing, and nurturing strategies and practices that support the principles of balanced and restorative justice in Pennsylvania.

# Recommendations for Supporting the Family Involvement Focus at the State Level

## **In order for meaningful family involvement to become a permanent and sustained function of the juvenile justice system, state level policymakers should:**

- Partner to undertake a comprehensive review of existing juvenile laws, regulations, policy and standards that can address the issue of family involvement. At a minimum, this comprehensive review should include Pennsylvania's Juvenile Act (Pa. C.S. Sec. 6301 et seq. with appendix) and Department of Public Welfare regulations guiding residential care (Title 55 Pa. Code Chapter 3800).
- Review existing training and professional development opportunities and curricula as they relate to family involvement for juvenile justice professionals in Pennsylvania through both the Center for Juvenile Justice Training and Research at Shippensburg University and the Pennsylvania Council of Children, Youth and Family Services (PCCYFC), as well as other training resources and opportunities, including cross-system resources. Family leaders should be partners in the development and implementation of such training, and families involved with the system should have opportunities to participate.

## **The Balanced and Restorative Justice Implementation Committee of the Pennsylvania Council of Chief Juvenile Probation Officers should continue to address family involvement through its revised Strategic Plan.**

- This committee is the principle advisory body overseeing strategy and implementation issues influencing balanced and restorative justice policy and practice, and has committed to oversee this process. The committee can offer its expertise in operationalizing a significant philosophic and practice reform aligned with balanced and restorative practices to insure that family involvement is both imbedded in this reform, and as such is availed of the accompanying commitment to substantive and effective implementation.

## **The Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention Committee (JJJPC) of the Pennsylvania Commission on Crime and Delinquency (PCCD) can support existing programs and expand availability of local community led prevention planning coalitions and evidence-based prevention and intervention programs that are centered on and promote the family's strengths and involvement.**

- Through JJJPC (the federally mandated State Advisory Group in Pennsylvania), PCCD oversees federal funding and reports directly to the Governor. JJJPC has supported the implementation of evidence-based prevention and intervention programs. Because family involvement is an emerging evidence-based practice, JJJPC will play a critical role in developing approaches that support family involvement in the juvenile justice system as well as preventing their children from encountering this system.

# A Definition and Principles for Family Involvement

The Family Involvement Subcommittee drafted the following *Definition and Principles for Family Involvement in Juvenile Justice* based on their discussions, the focus group outcomes, and a review of the current literature. The subcommittee offers the definition and principles for guidance as the system moves forward in improving family involvement in the juvenile justice process.

The subcommittee expects and welcomes comment from the field and broader community on the definition and principles of Family Involvement as well as the larger document within which they sit. The subcommittee proposes that after further comment, that the principles are adopted as guiding resources within the larger body of Pennsylvania's juvenile justice policy and practice publications. This effort is viewed as the beginning of the process to define and adopt meaningful and effective Family Involvement in Pennsylvania's Juvenile Justice System.

## Definition of Family Involvement in Juvenile Justice

Family Involvement is empowering families, based on their strengths, to have an active role in their child's disposition and treatment.

## Principles of Family Involvement in Juvenile Justice

- Effective and authentic family involvement supports the principles and practice of balanced and restorative justice and engages the family and juvenile justice system together with the youth in repairing the harm and moving the youth to become a competent and responsible community member.
- Family involvement is predicated on the recognition that the family is a child's primary emotional, social, cultural, and spiritual resource.
- Families are involved by the inherent nature of their role, and the quality of their involvement hinges on a dynamic interaction of personal and environmental factors.
- All families will act in the best interest of their child, and fulfill their role, when they have the knowledge, skills, and supports necessary to provide ongoing and developmentally appropriate guidance and interaction.
- Where families are unable to act in the best interest of their child, this should be seen as a complex phenomenon that the family would choose to counteract, if an avenue to do so presented itself.
- Positive family engagement involves a discrete set of approaches and services that systems can provide to families to assist them in meeting their family's needs, including in helping them make the best use of system and community resources.
- A juvenile justice system committed to family involvement ensures that there are flexible and authentic opportunities for families to partner in the design, implementation, and monitoring of their child's plan, as well as juvenile justice system policy, program, and practices which support responsive, effective outcomes for youth.

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# Members

## Family Involvement Subcommittee of the Mental Health/Juvenile Justice Workgroup for Models for Change-Pennsylvania and Family Involvement Workgroup of the Pennsylvania Council of Chief Juvenile Probation Officer's Balanced & Restorative Justice Implementation Committee (Merged March 2009)

### **Barbara J. Altenburger**

Program Manager  
Parents Involved Network of Philadelphia  
Crisis Response Advocacy Project  
Family and Youth Division  
Mental Health Association in Southeastern Pennsylvania

### **Randa Bieber**

Human Service Program Specialist  
Bureau of Juvenile Justice Services  
Pennsylvania Department of Public Welfare

### **Susan Blackburn**

Balanced and Restorative Justice Specialist  
Juvenile Court Consultant  
Center for Juvenile Justice Training and Research  
Shippensburg University

### **Karen Brenneman**

Associate Director of Family Outreach Programs  
Child & Family Focus, Inc. (Family Advocate in Chester County)

### **Sheila Bressler**

Berks County CASSP Coordinator  
Berks County Mental Health/Mental Retardation Program

### **Diana Brocius**

Pennsylvania Families Inc.

### **Lesley Dawson-Cousar**

Allegheny Family Network

### **Dan Delucey**

Youth Engagement Specialist  
System of Care Initiative  
Allegheny County Department of Human Services

### **Kristen DeComo**

Mental Health/Juvenile Justice Coordinator  
Allegheny County Department of Human Services

### **Autumn L. Dickman**

Project Manager  
Models for Change-Pennsylvania  
Juvenile Law Center

### **Becky Español**

Supervisor  
Parents Involved Network of Philadelphia  
Mental Health Association in Southeastern Pennsylvania

### **Kelly Franklin**

Aftercare Specialist  
Pennsylvania Council of Chief Juvenile Probation Officers

### **Bruce Grim**

Associate Director  
Pennsylvania Council of Children, Youth & Family Services

### **Mary Gaspari**

Mental Health/Juvenile Justice Coordinator  
Chester County Models for Change  
Chester County Juvenile Probation

**Joe Guillama**

Public Defender  
Berks County

**John Herb**

Director of Training  
Center for Juvenile Justice Training and Research  
Shippensburg University

**Norka Karina**

Family member  
Allegheny County

**Marietta Lamb-Mawby**

Chief Juvenile Probation Officer  
Chester County  
Juvenile Probation

**Wendy Luckenbill**

Child Policy Coordinator  
Mental Health Association  
in Pennsylvania

**Deb Ormsby**

Family Networking Project Coordinator  
Huntington, Mifflin, & Juniata Counties  
National Alliance on Mental Illness

**Arlene L. Prentice**

Juvenile Court Consultant  
Juvenile Court Judges' Commission

**Linda Rainey**

Family Advocate  
Erie County Care Management

**Jeanine Rasky**

Systems Integration Director  
Allegheny County Department of Human Services

**Keith Snyder**

Deputy Director  
Juvenile Court Judges' Commission

**Richard Steele**

Court Consultant/Aftercare Specialist  
Juvenile Court Judges' Commission

**Alan Tezak**

Project Consultant  
Mental Health/Juvenile Justice System Coordination  
Models for Change-Pennsylvania

**Donna Tuttle**

Family Peer Specialist  
The Advocacy Alliance (Mental Health Association in  
Pennsylvania affiliate for Northeastern Pennsylvania)

**Lisa Varon**

Network Project Manager (Former)  
Pennsylvania Latino Juvenile Justice  
Congreso de Latinos Unidos

**Debbie Willett**

Family Support Advocate  
System of Care Youth & Family Teams  
Chester County Juvenile Probation



# Family Involvement in Pennsylvania Juvenile Justice Focus Group Hosts

## **Adelphoi Village/Multisystemic Therapy Program Therapists**

Gary Soltys, Director

## **Allegheny County, Department of Human Services**

Kristen DeComa, Mental Health/Juvenile Justice Coordinator

## **Balanced and Restorative Justice Implementation Committee**

Jim Rieland, Chair

Director of Probation Services, Allegheny County

Susan Blackburn, Balanced and Restorative Justice Specialist

## **Beaver County System of Care: Optimizing Resources, Education and Supports (BCSCORES)**

Denis Sutter, Coordinator

## **Shippensburg University**

### **Center for Juvenile Justice Training & Research**

John Cookus, Director

Stephen Bishop, Director of Graduate Education Programs

John Herb, Director of Training

## **Defender Association of Philadelphia**

Michael Moore, Juvenile Justice Training Coordinator

## **Pennsylvania Department of Public Welfare Office of Mental Health and Substance Abuse Services, Children's Bureau**

Dr. Gordon Hodas, Child Psychiatrist

## **Dauphin County Juvenile Probation Office Family Group Conferencing Program**

Jeff Patton, Deputy Chief Juvenile Probation Officer

## **Huntington, Mifflin, and Juniata Counties Mental Health, Mental Retardation Joinder Family Networking Project**

Deb Ormsby, Coordinator

## **HSAO-Allegheny County**

### **Juvenile Justice Related Parent and Youth Focus Groups**

Debra Freeman, Executive Director

## **Juvenile Court Judges' Commission**

Jim Anderson, Executive Director,

Keith Snyder, Deputy Director

Rick Steele, Aftercare Consultant

## **Juvenile Detention Centers Association of Pennsylvania (JDCAP)**

Nicole Remsberg, Executive Director (former)

## **Mental Health Association in Southeastern Pennsylvania Family and Youth Division Parents Involved Network**

Becky Espanol, Supervisor

## **Pennsylvania Council of Children, Youth and Family Services (PCCYFS)**

Bernadette Bianchi, Executive Director

Bruce Grim, Deputy Director

## **Juvenile Defenders Association of Pennsylvania (JDAP)**

Bob Listenbee, President

Laval Miller-Wilson, formerly of Juvenile Law Center and  
currently Executive Director of the Pennsylvania Health  
Law Project



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