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Collaborative Approach to Juvenile Justice Reform

*Parent Participation, a successful approach
to Involving parents in Allegheny County*

by Jeffrey Fraser

When Russell Carlino assesses the factors that influence whether youths will be able to turn their lives around and steer clear of future criminal activity, the involvement of a parent or guardian at home rises to the top of the list. “Any probation officer will tell you that a kid’s chances of success are directly related to the person at home being involved,” says Carlino, Allegheny County Juvenile Probation administrator. “Whether it is a mother, grandmother, father, aunt or uncle, their involvement is probably the most critical factor in a kid’s success.”

Research supports such observations. In the state of Washington, for example, researchers reported that the success or failure of service and treatment plans for youths are heavily influenced by whether parents are able to participate in discussion and planning sessions, are afforded a voice in treatment decisions and are able to develop a sense of ownership in the course of treatment that is put in place.

In Allegheny County, Juvenile Justice Related Services (JJRS) has been highly successful in engaging parents and guardians in treatment and planning related to youths with behavioral health issues who are involved in the juvenile justice system. Human Services Administration Organization (HSAO), a private agency specializing in juvenile behavioral health, administers JJRS and the closely related Residential Treatment Group (RTF Group) for the county Department of Human Services.

From July 2009 through June 2010, for example, parents or guardians were present for 86 percent to 92 percent of the critical interagency sessions held to discuss planning and treatment for children in the juvenile court system identified with behavioral health issues. Specifically, parents and guardians participated in 86 percent of the initial Interagency Team sessions, 92 percent of rewaiver meetings and 91 percent of the discharge meetings held during that period.ⁱ

A 2002 report provides evidence that HSAO’s success in engaging parents is not a recent phenomenon. The report examined participation of parents and guardians of youths referred for mental health residential treatment placements from January through June 2001. HSAO data showed during that 6-month period, parents and other family members attended more than 86 percent of the Interagency Team meetings held to discuss issues related to their children accessing and receiving residential services. The meetings included initial discussions of possibilities, reevaluation and discharge planning.

“We start with the assumption that families have to be at the table and have to be involved,” says Debra Freeman, HSAO executive director. “It’s about trying to find ways to engage the family from the minute you get that referral.”

Generally, says Freeman, “We try to educate parents about the process and then we try to empower them. The message from the beginning is: You have a role and responsibility here. You are a vital part of this planning. We are here to support you, to educate you and to advocate for your point of view.”

Certain standards are embraced, such as promptly responding to parents' phone calls, keeping parents informed in a timely manner and giving parents straightforward, accurate information and answers to their questions.

These simple practices are important to parents. Open, honest and clear communication – or the lack of it – between families and juvenile justice personnel was the single most issue raised in focus groups held throughout Pennsylvania that included juvenile justice personnel, parents and youth. The focus groups were convened from 2008 to 2009 to examine the experiences and observations of a wide range of juvenile justice stakeholders as part of a report on family involvement in juvenile justice prepared by Models for Change – Pennsylvania.ⁱⁱ

In Allegheny County, a random sample of 20 percent of families of youths referred for mental health residential treatment placements provide a glimpse of what practices are important to parents and why HSAO's approach has led to high rates of participation.ⁱⁱⁱ

- **Sharing information.** Parents said they were well informed, frequently contacted, included throughout the process, and that staff made sincere efforts to answer their questions. One divorced couple, for example, said staff kept both parents informed – something they had not previously experienced.
- **Decision-making.** Parents reported that they were able to retain their role as decision makers for their children. Said one mother: “They didn’t make a move without me.”
- **Respect and support.** Parents said staff respected them and supported them. One parent, who struggled with mental illness, said: “They treated me like a person. Nobody else did, but they did.”
- **Responsiveness and efficiency.** Parents said they appreciated both. They reported that staff moved quickly and efficiently to meet their needs and the needs of their children.
- **Returning phone calls.** What may seem like a minor point was, in fact, something parents said they greatly appreciated. “Their communication is what does it,” said one.
- **Honesty.** Parents said one of the most important ways staff supported their participation was by being honest and not making false promises. “When I went into this, I knew nothing,” said one parent. “They told me what can be done and what can’t. They told me the truth. My head was spinning and they helped me make sense of a difficult time.”
- **Advocacy.** Parents routinely reported that staff were effective advocates for their child and family.
- **Quality assurance and oversight.** Parents appreciated that staff reviewed their child’s progress while in placement and kept them informed. They said such practices reassured them that their child was receiving the treatment that was agreed upon.

“From our experience, most parents want to be involved,” says Freeman. “The level of their involvement varies. But we believe that if you empower parents, they will participate at some level and somewhere down the line they may participate more.”

RESOURCES:

ⁱFreeman, D., & Allegheny County RTF Group (2002). Parent Participation in the Residential Treatment Process. A CASSP discussion paper. Pittsburgh, PA: Human Services Administration Organization.

ⁱⁱLuckenbill, W., & Yeager, C. (2009). Family Involvement in Pennsylvania's Juvenile Justice System. Harrisburg, PA: Models for Change – Pennsylvania. www.modelsforchange.net/publications/238

ⁱⁱⁱFreeman & Allegheny County RTF Group, op. cit.



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