

Vera Institute of Justice

Criminal Justice Issues and Prisoners' Rights

<https://www.vera.org/blog/new-leadership-in-kentuckys-department-of-juvenile-justice>

Public Facing Advocacy Writing

Vera's Family Justice Program sat down with Hasan Davis, acting commissioner of the Kentucky Department of Juvenile Justice (DJJ), to discuss the influence of family in his life and his work.

Q: How has your family helped you get to where you are today?

A: Growing up as a black male with dyslexia, attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), and a hearing and vision impairment, I realized life for me would be a constant series of challenges to overcome or it would be nothing at all. My parents divorced when I was six, and we went on and off of food stamps. I attended six elementary schools and can remember 10 different permanent and temporary living addresses before I began high school.

When I was 11, I got arrested, and I remember waiting at the police station for my mom. As I saw the other mothers arrive, I could see the fear, frustration, and embarrassment that comes with having a child get caught up in this system, which came out as anger and threats. I had to leave work to come here. I am going to let them keep you next time. I have three more kids to raise. So as I waited for my mother, I was getting my speech ready. It was going to start with something like, I'm a black man, and I am going to do what I have to do to survive, so you need to just back up off me. When she showed up, she was really calm. I figured she didn't want to show herself in front of the police, and I thought she's going to lose it when we get in the car, but instead there was deafening silence. Halfway home I finally found the courage to look up at her, and she was crying these huge tears. She looked down at me and said, Baby, if you could see what I see every time I look at you, you would know how great you are.

Having family connections has been integral to my success. In the middle of my internal and external chaotic world, my mother and stepfather gave me the support and courage to find a path beyond my worst choices. And no matter what I did my mother refused to let me forget the powerful image she held up as the man I could one day be. It was something to aspire to.

Q: How does family fit into your vision for DJJ? And what has been the biggest challenge to increasing your attention to families?

A: Family engagement is becoming a priority. I want to look at assets instead of deficits, looking not at what problems a child and family came to us with but asking instead What gifts do you and your family bring with you? Our greatest challenge will be to change the way we think of ourselves as a closed system. We often work in isolation from other social service systems. When you add families into our work, you have to serve youth and families on a case-by-case basis and respond to their particular needs. Some juvenile justice professionals are uncomfortable when I refer to us as a child-serving or family-serving agency. To assuage that concern and draw people in, we have to help our staff at every level understand how much better their work can be when they make these adjustments.

Q: What are some of the steps you are taking to make the department more family-focused?

A: I am very proud of the conversations that were started by Vera and excited about conversations that have happened since your visit. Through a series of strategic planning sessions, I am starting to see that there are a lot of people who want the tools to work with families differently.

We are quickly moving toward a series of phone policies that will reduce the economic burden families have traditionally carried for communicating with their children in our care. Every child deserves a number of free phone calls to family and the opportunity to earn more chances to communicate. We are even exploring how to better use our internal web camera system to allow for video calls for families who may have children in specialized programs too far from their homes to make regular visits.

We are looking at how we can strengthen the support we give to families in the community and see if that can help reduce the number of youth in residential placements. We're talking about increasing the use of evening education centers and the possible development of weekend reporting centers, which will provide more opportunities to keep youth in their homes. By using more furloughs from the treatment facility to home, we can get kids practicing new coping and success skills in their home environment. They can then process their visits and discuss how they will address the challenges they'll encounter when they transition home for good. I am hopeful this will reduce the number of revocations we process as we help the youth and their families transition with success.

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