

Vera Institute of Justice

Criminal Justice Issues and Prisoners' Rights

<https://www.vera.org/blog/the-importance-of-identifying-engaging-and-empowering-families-in-juvenile-justice-systems>

Public Facing Advocacy Writing

Last week, Vera, in partnership with the Georgetown University McCourt School of Public Policy, hosted a lively discussion about the importance of family engagement for youth involved in the juvenile justice system and launched a new report, [Identifying, Engaging, and Empowering Families: A Charge for Juvenile Justice Agencies](#). Shay Bilchik, founder and director of the [Center for Juvenile Justice Reform](#) at Georgetown University, moderated the event.

The event featured key stakeholders in the juvenile justice system: family advocates, community-based organizations, government officials, and philanthropic partners who discussed strategies juvenile justice agencies can take to involve families more often. These strategies included innovative approaches to family engagement at the city, county, and state levels in places like Indiana, Ohio, Virginia, Washington, DC, New York City, St. Louis, Missouri, and Sedgwick County, Kansas.

Family engagement is integral to youth justice, said Alexandra Frank of the Juvenile Justice Strategy Group at the [Annie E. Casey Foundation](#). Research shows that youth with family and networks of other important people—friends, godparents, teachers, and others—have better outcomes during and after incarceration. Ms. Frank also shared success stories from Virginia, where she, in partnership with Vera and Justice4Families, is helping the state reform their system by centering the changes on families concerns.

We then heard from Daniel Mendoza-Jacobo, youth partnership consultant to the Annie E. Casey Foundation, who shed light on issues relating to limitations on family engagement within juvenile correctional settings. We must be careful not to divide families, but [instead] to strengthen them, he said. Based on his own experience with the juvenile justice system, Mr. Mendoza-Jacobo offered insight on the ways agencies can work towards engaging families, such as expanding access to phone calls and visitation. He also emphasized the importance of having an understanding of each family's culture and heritage to effectively connect with them.

We need to focus on how we communicate with families, not what we communicate to them when it comes to youth, Eric Kolb, clinical supervisor of [Adolescent Portable Therapy](#) at CASES, said. According to Mr. Kolb, changing the way we think about families and expanding the definition of family can help end system involvement for youth.

Courtney Ramirez, executive director of the [Office of Family Engagement](#) in the New York City Administration for Children's Services, challenged us to think differently about families and highlighted the differences between family involvement and family engagement. Families need to be seen as partners, experts, and equals in discussions of family engagement and juvenile justice, she said.

Tracey Wells-Huggins, associate director of [Justice4Families](#), echoed this sentiment, identifying relationship-building as a key concept. The best way to engage is to partner, she said. The family perspective must be heard. Ms. Wells-Huggins added that family engagement is a cultural mindset, that requires each system stakeholder to operate from a family-focused lens. Mr. Bilchik closed the day with a charge for those who administer juvenile justice systems: Ultimately, if we are going to build trust, we're going to have to look at the way we engage families differently. He emphasized the importance of improving policies, staff training, and performance measurement to effectively change families' experiences with justice systems.

Our hope is that this paper and the event generate ideas for new ways to engage families whose children are in the juvenile justice system. [Download the report](#) and watch [Part 1](#) and [Part 2](#) of the event for more information.

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