

Vera Institute of Justice

Criminal Justice Issues and Prisoners' Rights

<https://www.vera.org/blog/strengthening-family-connections-for-youth-in-the-juvenile-justice-system>

Public Facing Advocacy Writing

I have worked in a juvenile corrections facility in Sedgwick County, Kansas for nearly 10 years.

In my current role, I am a corrections counselor; my primary job functions include completing admission papers as well as case management for the youth while they are in the facility. When I was first informed that [Vera was being hired by Sedgwick County, Kansas - Division of Corrections to improve and enhance our family engagement efforts](#), I wondered how Vera could offer any more ideas than what our current practice was.

In the past several years, Sedgwick County has implemented a number of reforms to our juvenile justice system, and made efforts to make sure youth in our facilities receive support from their families that they need in order to succeed. Our residential facility offered four visiting times weekly lasting approximately 45 minutes each, and approved visitors included grandparents, siblings, niece, and nephews, in addition to the standard parents and legal guardians. Phone calls to families cost nothing. We offered connections with community-based resources including education, mental health services, drug and alcohol services, and the ability to attend doctor, vision, and dental appointments. What could Vera possibly tell us that we needed to improve on?

After reviewing our policies and observing our day-to-day interactions with the youth and their families, Vera gave us a report of how our facility could specifically improve its engagement of families and it figuratively knocked me down a few pegs. I was proud of what we offered to a point that it was blinding. I was not able to see the things that we were clearly missing. It took a partnership with Vera to tell us something that should have been painfully clear: families want to not only visit their child, but be involved in their lives. Who knew that while these residents were in our care that they didn't stop being someone's child? Who knew that those families didn't stop caring because they were not the sole provider for their child at the present moment? The families knew. Vera knew. Vera challenged our way of thinking, daring us to set the bar as high as we could to better engage families. With a newfound humble attitude, we began shifting our thinking as to how we could better partner with families.

Our work began with redefining the word family. We serve young people that may not have a family that fits traditional definitions, and we needed to adapt our policies and practices to align with the families that we served daily. We began our work by broadening the umbrella of family: we allowed youth to voice who they considered family utilizing the Juvenile Relational Inquiry Tool (JRIT) and changed facility language from parent to family and son/daughter to loved one. This broadened definition and language, and JRIT utilization was changed throughout all of our policies. We increased visitation times and made visits more family-friendly by adding snacks and games. We began offering conversation starters (let's face it, it's really tough to talk with a teenager sometimes) and arts and crafts opportunities. We eliminated our policy of restricting residents to a certain number of phone calls a day with their families. To help families get a better understanding of where their loved one was living, we provided a virtual tour of the facility by adding a TV with a slideshow in the waiting area. We implemented sending an informal weekly document to families highlighting their loved ones progress and upcoming appointments. We empowered loved ones by informing them of their rights while their child was detained. Guess what? The families responded! Who knew, right?

While it may sound like implementing changes went smoothly, it was not always the case. Change is really hard for some people to embrace. We ran into hurdles, roadblocks, and some pushback from staff. Involving the staff early on the course of the road really helped keep everyone on board. It didn't take long to see some immediate results from the families. We soon began hearing staff saying that family engagement was working! Staff saw that more family members were coming to visit youth more consistently, families that used to struggle communicating during visitation were now laughing and playing games, and families were able to help out staff to address behavioral issues. In a six month time span, over 250 visits with youth occurred that were not previously permitted under old policy. Our facility saw a decrease of negative behaviors when working with the youth. Families were able to partner with the facility to provide support to their loved one when successes were achieved and help address negative behavior. With each roadblock, we had to stop and think how to work around it while keeping safety and security in mind; after all, our work is juvenile corrections. We switched hats from corrections-driven to family-driven and back to corrections-driven to really identify an outcome that would fulfill both needs: a safe and secure environment where youth and their families would stay connected and hopefully strengthen family bonds.

Looking back, I am certainly proud of all the work that this team has accomplished. I am proud to partner with the youths families knowing that in the end, we are striving for the same outcome. Truthfully, it is far less effort to take steps to work with a family from the beginning than being met with resistance from the family. A year later, we continue to see better outcomes from the changes we implemented after Vera evaluated our processes. Families complete surveys each month regarding their experience in our facility. We have received outstanding feedback from the families indicating that the families feel welcomed and remain a part of their loved ones life. One story that stands out the most is a 16-year-old male youth who did not have any family with the ability to visit him. He was connected with a foster visitor and his behavior improved greatly. Ultimately, he was released successfully from the facility. We also allowed our first parenting partner to visit their loved one in the facility. The male youth reported that having regular contact with his parenting partner reduced his anxiety regarding their unborn baby. Certainly, the greatest lesson learned was to remember that families actually want to be involved. When that fact drives every decision made for the facility and the residents, we can strengthen families ties to their youth. In doing so, we not only change their lives, but also can reduce recidivism rates and have a positive impact in our entire

community.

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