

Vera Institute of Justice

Criminal Justice Issues and Prisoners' Rights

<https://www.vera.org/blog/major-gains-for-family-engagement-in-indianas-juvenile-justice-system>

Public Facing Advocacy Writing

Last year, the Vera Institute of Justice's [Family Justice Program](#) wrapped up a multi-year project to develop and pilot family engagement standards for the [Performance-based Standards Learning Institute](#). All juvenile corrections facilities participating in PbS are now collecting information related to family engagement including a survey of family members twice a year. There are currently 48 facilities across 15 states collecting family surveys with a total of 1,033 family surveys collected since the start of the project.

One of the original pilot states is already benefiting from having data on family engagement after implementing the new standards last fall. Based on feedback from their PbS reports, Indiana's Pendleton Juvenile Correctional facility decided to increase their rates of visitation. They analyzed their visitation policies and made drastic changes opening up visitation hours to just about any time a family member can get to the facility. In addition to the expanded visiting hours, all restrictions on the number of visits a young person could receive were lifted.

These changes went into effect at the beginning of this year and, after just a few short months, the staff are seeing big changes. Not only did they successfully double their normal rate of visitation, they saw improved behavior by young people in the facility. The Family Justice Program found [a similar correlation between improved behavior and visits in Ohio](#).

Based on feedback from the family surveys, Indiana also recognized that families were not involved in treatment and reentry plans. In response, facility staff now call parents to discuss progress and behavior issues. Additionally, a family council was created. The family council, called PIES (Parent Information and Education Session), is designed to improve communication between the facility and parents. For example, acting on the council's suggestion, the facility now runs family fun nights.

Vera applauds Indiana's Division of Youth Services for having the courage to reflect on their practice, open themselves up to conversations with families, and make changes to increase opportunities for youth and families to connect.

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