

Vera Institute of Justice

Criminal Justice Issues and Prisoners' Rights

<https://www.vera.org/blog/focusing-on-youth-and-families-in-the-juvenile-justice-system>

Public Facing Advocacy Writing

[Justice for Families](#) (J4F) is a national alliance of local organizations committed to ending the youth incarceration epidemic. It was founded and is run by parents and families who have experienced the juvenile justice system with their children. We sat down with co-founder and executive director Grace Bauer-Lubow and associate director Tracey Wells-Huggins to discuss J4F's recent release of [Focus on Youth and Families: A Guide for Conducting Focus Groups with Youth and Families Impacted by the Juvenile Justice System](#). The guide is designed to help juvenile justice agencies, in partnership with community organizations, work more collaboratively with families toward juvenile justice reform.

Ms. Bauer-Lubow (GB) is the mother of three children and a respected leader and trusted confidant for families seeking justice across the country. She was previously a field organizer for the Campaign for Youth Justice and the director of Families and Friends of Louisiana's Incarcerated Children (FFLIC), which helped pass the Louisiana Juvenile Justice Reform Act of 2003 and close the Tallulah juvenile prison.

Ms. Huggins (TH), [who recently served on Veras panel on youth engagement](#), is also the founder of [Renewed Minds](#), an organization that provides advocacy, support, and educational programs for young people and families. She had been a nurse for over 20 years when, in 2007, she became a staunch and dedicated activist in the fight for juvenile system reform and its need for family engagement/partnership.

What was the inspiration for the focus group guide and how did it come to be?

GB: We were providing technical assistance with funding from the [Annie E. Casey Foundation](#) and saw a need for a focus group guide. We thought it was going to be a two-pager, but realized systems don't need the mechanical piece of holding a focus group that is something you could find instructions for online. As you can see, we ended up with 48 pages because it included rich guidance on how to appropriately and effectively engage with families and young people. I think that's the critical piece of the guide, not necessarily the mechanics. That is our contribution to the field and what makes us unique from other organizations and guides.

What is the most important advice for first-time focus group facilitators using the guide?

TH: Having an impacted family member help you host, promote, facilitate, and collect the data from the focus group is one of the most powerful and impactful things you can do. If the goal is to get authentic information, having a trusting relationship within a safe space is a must. Recognizing that relationship-building takes time; having someone who actually has intimate familiarity with the system co-facilitating and coordinating the event and standing side by side with you not as a token but as a real partner will help make the process much smoother and will also help you understand some of the practicalities you may have missed.

Are there any notable examples of communities implementing this guide?

GB: We are working with our partners at the Annie E. Casey Foundation to pilot the guide and the instructional webinar with deep-end Juvenile Detention Alternative (JDAI) sites. Several sites have now chosen their community-based partners and will begin conducting focus groups soon. J4F will then gather insights and ideas from the sites and incorporate this feedback into a second edition of the guide to ensure it meets the needs of the juvenile justice agencies and families.

Are there upcoming projects J4F is working on that we should watch out for?

GB: We are very excited about two new technical assistance tools! The first will be a system assessment that is designed through the lens of families and young people who are involved in the system. It is created to be a front-door-to-back-door look at what the juvenile justice system actually looks like from the perspective of families. The goal is to have system assessments that involve and engage families in the process they do the assessment, provide feedback, and make recommendations for changes.

The second piece is a five-day curriculum for system stakeholders presented by families to train them on fundamentals for families and youth partnership, tools, and strategies to help them in their day-to-day work. It also covers implicit bias and systemic racism.

J4F has spent 15 years gathering a ton of knowledge and training from people all across the country about organizing and helping families of kids involved in either the juvenile or adult justice system understand how the system functions. We often hear families say that's not fair or that's not right, but the system still continues to function in the way it was set up to function, which includes incarcerating and involving mostly people of color and poor people.

TH: The more we do, the more we find there is to do. It is such an honor to be a part of this movement, but we also know we have a long ways to go. We haven't begun to touch on reentry aspects and reintegration for our young people, so as the work evolves, we plan on being there, fighting every step of the way.

Transformative change, sent to your inbox.

