



Justice for Families
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February 23, 2012

Mayor Michael R. Bloomberg
City Hall
New York, NY 10007

CC: Department of Probation Commissioner, Vincent Schiraldi
Administration for Children Services Commissioner, Ron Richter

Dear Mayor Bloomberg,

Justice for Families (J4) commends your office's and Governor Cuomo's efforts to pass the 'Close to Home' initiative and acknowledges the hard work that has gone into advancing realignment by the Department of Probation and the Administration for Children's Services. In particular, we appreciate the probation department's efforts to reduce the number of children entering the system, by increasing two-fold the number of 'adjustments.' The use of a forecasting model to determine the potential need for particular placements and the department's national investigation into best practices is praiseworthy. The 'Close to Home' initiative will help ensure that New York City youth can stay in a facility, that is closer to home. It is also commendable because: it requires that judges document their rationale for sending a child to a 'more secure' placement than that recommended by probation; it does not allow judges to set a minimum length of stay for youth classified as non-secure; and it creates a monitoring/oversight role for the Office of Children and Family Services.

While the Governor and the City's efforts are commendable, still more could be done to move toward a family-centered juvenile justice system and to keep youth out of residential placements. Families should be more involved in the design of realignment and the city should clarify its plans to ensure ongoing family engagement, input, and decision making in the implementation of the 'Close to Home' initiative. Only through this engagement and partnership with families and communities can the City ensure the success and sustainability of its efforts.

J4 is a national network of local organizations working to transform families from *victims* of the prison epidemic to *leaders* of the movement for fairness and opportunity for our nation's youth. J4 is partnering with over a dozen local organizations around the country, including Community Connections for Youth and the Center for Community Alternatives, to produce a National Families Report. The report will outline the contours of family-centered juvenile justice practice.

In furtherance of our National Families Report, J4 and its local partners have conducted a review of media coverage of families of system-involved youth, compiled a literature review of family-centered best practices, collected over 1,000 hour-long surveys of families and conducted 26 family focus groups (including 168 surveys and 4 focus groups in New York). Families have led the design of the focus groups and surveys, conducted the focus groups, collected the surveys, and are leading the analysis of report findings. The completed National Families Report will not only define family-centered justice practice but also demonstrate the capacity of families to craft and define a policy agenda in their own interest.

There is a tendency to discount the input of families as being biased by support for their loved ones who have become system involved. Nearly half of the families of incarcerated and court involved youth we surveyed have also either personally been a survivor of a crime or have a family member who has. These are families who want to live in safe communities *and* support a juvenile justice system that produces greater public safety.

Our attached policy paper “Toward a Family Centered Youth Justice System” is designed to offer some suggestions on how to move toward family-centered practice. It is based on preliminary research findings in New York (more information will be forthcoming in the National Families Report).

In sum, the paper urges juvenile justice administrators and relevant stakeholders to: 1) *listen to families* through listening sessions and policy forums; 2) *orient and provide peer support for families* through paid peer support positions within justice systems; 3) *open doors to families* through regular unfettered facility monitoring; 4) *share power with families* through family participation and leadership in policy setting bodies; and 5) *invest in families and communities* through the reallocation of resources away from failed ‘tough-on-crime’ approaches toward social and economic building blocks for youth and families.

We hope upon reading these recommendations you find concrete ways to maximize resources and develop a family and community-centered juvenile justice system. As a next step, we ask that you contact us to help facilitate conversations with family and community partners who can help plot subsequent steps forward.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in cursive script, appearing to read "Zach Norris", with a long horizontal line extending to the right.

Zachary Norris

Co-Director, Justice for Families