



MOTHERS AT THE GATE:

HOW A POWERFUL FAMILY
MOVEMENT IS TRANSFORMING
THE JUVENILE JUSTICE SYSTEM

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PARTICIPATING ORGANIZATIONS AND FAMILY JUSTICE LEADERS



Justice for Families

Representative: Grace Bauer-Lubow (Executive Director and Co-Founder)

Website: www.justice4families.org

Location: Sulphur, Louisiana

Description: Justice for Families (J4F) is a national alliance of local organizations committed to ending the youth incarceration epidemic. It was founded and is currently run by parents and families who have experienced the juvenile justice system with their children. Justice for Families works toward two primary goals: 1) to transform how juvenile justice systems operate so that families have voice and power in both how and what decisions are made and 2) to move resources away from youth incarceration and toward direct investments in the youth, families, and communities most harmed by these policies.



Citizens for Prison Reform

Representative: Lois DeMott (Founder)

Website: www.micpr.org

Location: Lansing, Michigan

Description: Citizens for Prison Reform is a grassroots effort that is statewide and family-run. It began as a letter-writing campaign to the Michigan state legislature and governor in 2008 after Lois DeMott, the mother of an incarcerated youth, saw the conditions of not only the mentally ill and the juveniles within, but the lack of meaningful programming and rehabilitation for all prisoners.



Albert Cobarrubias Justice Project

Representative: Raj Jayadev (Organizer)

Website: www.acjusticeproject.org

Location: San Jose, California

Description: The Albert Cobarrubias Justice Project (ACJP) — comprised of a network of families, organizers, advocates, and lawyers — is a community organizing model aimed at equipping impacted communities with the tools and information needed to meaningfully impact their local criminal justice system. The principal means of accomplishing this goal is bringing a community organizing ethic to the court process; encouraging the active engagement of families and communities in the defense of a loved one who has had contact with the criminal justice system; holding the public agencies that make up the criminal justice system accountable; and bringing a community presence to what is usually an isolating court process. The premise of the Albert Cobarrubias Justice Project is that an informed and involved public can dramatically transform the outcomes of their own cases, as well as the landscape of power in the criminal justice system. It is a program of Silicon Valley De-Bug.

Ella Baker Center for Human Rights

Representative: Zachary Norris (Executive Director)

Website: www.ellabakercenter.org

Location: Oakland, California

Description: The Ella Baker Center for Human Rights advances racial and economic justice to ensure dignity and opportunity for low-income people and people of color. The current vision of the Ella Baker Center is about more than just an end to mass incarceration; it's about actively rebuilding and reinvesting in the communities most damaged by it. The Ella Baker Center calls its approach justice reinvestment — the reallocation of resources from mass incarceration toward education and job opportunities, also known as "books not bars, jobs not jails." The Ella Baker Center believes that there are three basic elements needed to ensure justice reinvestment becomes the new public safety standard: 1) support for impacted families and communities; 2) a movement of impacted people and allies from all walks of life; and 3) a shift of resources to communities and people-centered programs.



PARTICIPATING ORGANIZATIONS AND FAMILY JUSTICE LEADERS (CONTINUED)



Families and Friends of Louisiana's Incarcerated Children

Representative: Gina Womack (Executive Director)

Website: www.ffmpeg.org

Location: New Orleans, Louisiana

Description: Families and Friends of Louisiana's Incarcerated Children (FFLIC) is a grassroots membership-based organization working to transform the systems that put children at risk of prison. Families and Friends of Louisiana's Incarcerated Children was created in response to horrifying stories of abuse and neglect in Louisiana's secure-care facilities. It advocates for the children who are lost in the abusive juvenile justice system and gives parents a voice when their children are taken from them. The organization's goal is changing the practices and culture in these facilities so that they no longer mimic the adult prison system and instead provide a nurturing and rehabilitative environment for incarcerated youth.



California Families Against Solitary Confinement

Representative: Dolores Canales (Co-Founder)

Website: www.solitarywatch.com/cfasc

Location: Anaheim, California

Description: Born from the first July 2011 hunger strike initiated in the Pelican Bay Secure Housing Unit, a movement of family members came together in September 2011 to support efforts to end solitary confinement in California's prisons. California Families Against Solitary Confinement (CFASC) is dedicated to stopping the inhumane treatment of prisoners within the California penal system, especially those held in solitary confinement. Its ultimate goal is to end the use of solitary confinement; its short-term goals are to reduce its use and insist on due process and fairness.



Texas Inmate Families Association

Representative: Jennifer Erschabek (Executive Director)

Website: www.tifa.org

Location: Austin, Texas

Description: The Texas Inmate Families Association provides support, education, and advocacy for its members through monthly chapter meetings, a quarterly newsletter, and access to the executive director of TIFA. TIFA partners with the Texas Criminal Justice Coalition, Bridges to Life, the Austin/Travis County Reentry Roundtable, the Texas Jail Project, Texas Voices for Reason and Justice, and the Windham School District in order to better serve inmates and their families.

Families and Friends Organizing for Reform of Juvenile Justice Missouri (FORJ-MO)

Representative: Tracy McClard (Founder)

Website: www.forj-mo.org

Location: Jefferson City, Missouri

Description: Families and Friends Organizing for Reform of Juvenile Justice is dedicated to ending the practice of placing children and youth under the age of 18 in Missouri's jails and prisons and providing all youth involved in Missouri's juvenile or adult criminal justice system the necessary rehabilitation needed to become productive members of society by engaging and empowering families and allies of these youth. Its goals are: 1) to organize and empower families and allies most affected by the current juvenile justice practices to advocate for policy reform on the state and federal level and 2) to educate and bring awareness to policy makers and the general public about the horrific dangers to children, families, and communities of the current practice of trying, sentencing, and incarcerating youth in adult jails and prisons.



PARTICIPATING ORGANIZATIONS AND FAMILY JUSTICE LEADERS (CONTINUED)



Renewed Minds

Representative: Tracey Wells-Huggins (Founder)

Website: www.renewedminds4all.org

Location: Vineland, New Jersey

Description: Renewed Minds focuses on providing advocacy, support, and education to at-risk youth and families.



Community Connections for Youth

Representative: Jeannette Bocanegra (Director of Family Engagement)

Website: www.cc-fy.org

Location: Bronx, New York

Description: Community Connections for Youth (CCFY) is a New York-based nonprofit organization whose mission is to mobilize indigenous faith and neighborhood organizations to develop effective community-based alternative-to-incarceration programs for youth. Community Connections for Youth believes that increasing local community capacity to work with youth in the justice system is the key to reducing youth crime and delinquency and improving long-term life outcomes for youth. Community Connections for Youth believes that reducing overreliance on the juvenile justice system can only happen when strong community networks are mobilized to care for youth and hold them accountable. This requires engaging community stakeholders closest to the problems, which includes faith and community leaders in affected neighborhoods, family members of system-involved youth, and the young people themselves.



Photo: Phoebe Ferguson / Southern Poverty Law Center

Friends and Families of Youth Incarcerated at Walnut Grove

Representative: Michael McIntosh (Founder)

Location: Walnut Grove, Mississippi

Description: Friends and Families of Youth Incarcerated at Walnut Grove is a community-based organization founded by Michael McIntosh. The organization advocates for an end to the abuse, maltreatment, and intimidation suffered by juveniles incarcerated at the Walnut Grove Youth Correctional Facility, as a result of negligent prison policies and physical, mental, and verbal brutality at the hands of prison staff.

Texas Families of Incarcerated Youth

Representative: Tarsha Jackson (Former Executive Director)

Website: www.tfiy.org

Location: Houston, Texas

Description: Texas Families of Incarcerated Youth (TFIY) is a network of families and community members who have been affected by the juvenile justice system. The mission of the organization is to engage family and community members in reducing the juvenile and adult detention population through education, addressing racial disparities, and strengthening community leadership capacities to better serve youth in their respected communities. Overall, TFIY's goal is to bring families and communities together to address the issues impacting system-involved youth and their families.



PARTICIPATING ORGANIZATIONS AND FAMILY JUSTICE LEADERS (CONTINUED)



Texas Organizing Project (TOP)

Representative: Tarsha Jackson (Harris County Director)

Website: www.organizetexas.org

Location: Houston, Texas

Description: The Texas Organizing Project (TOP) works to improve the lives of low-income and working-class Texas families through community organizing and civic and electoral engagement. TOP is a membership-based organization that conducts direct action organizing, grassroots lobbying, and electoral organizing led by working families in Texas. In addition, TOP provides training, leadership development, and public education, putting community organizers on the ground in working communities throughout the state. TOP organizers identify issues of common concern; recruit, develop, and train leaders; and build partnerships with community, labor, and policy groups to strengthen neighborhoods across the state of Texas.



Essie Justice Group

Representative: Gina Clayton (Founder and Executive Director)

Website: www.essiejusticegroup.org

Location: Oakland, California

Description: The Essie Justice Group harnesses the collective power of women with incarcerated loved ones to end mass incarceration. The organization's mission is to expose and end the harm that incarceration has had on the lives of women and families. The Essie Justice Group is doing this by fostering connections between women, conducting advocacy, and driving research.



Sue Badeau

Website: www.suebadeau.com

Location: Philadelphia, Pennsylvania

Description: Susan Badeau (Sue) writes and speaks extensively on topics related to children, particularly those with special needs, and is a frequent and passionate keynote speaker and workshop leader at state, regional, and national conferences. She has worked in child-serving fields as a professional for 33 years — in adoption, foster care, juvenile justice, children's mental health, and education in both public and private agencies. She has developed curricula on many topics used to prepare professional child welfare staff, adoptive and foster parents, judges, attorneys, and youth. Past positions have included serving as Director of the Cross Systems Integration team within the Knowledge Management department of Casey Family Programs, as a Senior Fellow within the Department of Justice, Executive Director of the Philadelphia Children's Commission (focused on all aspects of children's health and well-being in the city of Philadelphia), and as the Deputy Director of the Pew Commission on Children in Foster Care. In addition, she has been a policy consultant for public and private agencies, universities, and court systems. Sue serves on the national boards of the National Child Traumatic Stress Network (NCTSN), the North American Council on Adoptable Children (NACAC), National Center for Youth in Custody, All Children, All Families, and Justice for Families.

GRACE AND COREY: PART 1

At first, Grace Bauer-Lubow fought by instinct — a mother’s instinct, fueled by the prospect of losing her son.

Corey was in middle school when his beloved grandmother died unexpectedly. The 11-year-old honor student channeled his grief into low-grade rebellion, as kids that age will do, skipping school, smoking behind the gym, finally getting picked up by the police in a car with some older kids and a stolen radio.

More than a decade later, Corey’s life has been turned inside out by this event.

Not yet a teenager, he was shipped to Louisiana’s Tallulah Correctional Center, an institution that the New York Times would later call “so rife with brutality, cronyism, and neglect that many legal experts say it is the worst in the nation.”¹ Broken bones, black eyes, fractured jaws, and gang rapes were regular occurrences.

The first time Grace visited Corey at Tallulah, she barely recognized her rail-thin child. His eyebrows had been shaved off, highlighting a round indentation on his temple. He had a huge black eye, a split lip, and a bruise on his ribcage in the shape of a boot.

“Mom, this is what happens,” he told her flatly. “A guard did this. They want you to know who’s boss.”

When the one-hour visit ended, Grace found herself barely able to leave her son behind. But as she continued to visit, meeting other families who were different from hers in every way but the one that now mattered most, “something in me began to change,” she says. “Whoever I had been before was dying.

I started to see those boys as just like my boy, and those mothers as just like me. I didn’t know it then, but I had found my true calling — fighting the abuses that were destroying my boy, and so many other mothers’ children. It was the beginning of the fight of a lifetime.”

Corey, meanwhile, was being drawn into an all too common cycle. Traumatized by the brutality he experienced behind bars and tripped up on the outside by his criminal record, Corey was shuttled from one “placement” to another. Incarcerated youth recidivate at rates up to 70 percent, with the initial incarceration being the most significant factor in determining recidivism.² Today, Corey is serving a 12-year term for armed robbery.

His mother’s life has been transformed as well. A quiet stay-at-home mother of three when Corey was first arrested, Grace has evolved into a powerful advocate — first as a leader within an alliance of parents that helped to shut down Tallulah and initiate an overhaul of the Louisiana juvenile system, and later, with colleague Zachary Norris, as the co-founder and current director of Justice for Families, a coalition of family members of incarcerated youth that is making itself heard at the national level. But she remains more likely to identify herself as a “mama” than a leader.

Across the country, mothers like Grace — along with fathers, siblings, cousins, and grandparents — are emerging as powerful leaders in the movement to close this nation’s abusive and ineffective juvenile lockdowns. They are looking for alternative responses that address juvenile delinquency without foreclosing the futures of their children.

INTRODUCTION

“This is hard work. It’s very hard work. For leaders in this role, often it’s come about because of our own experience, and we have done it with blood, sweat, and tears.”

— Lois DeMott, Citizens for Prison Reform

One in four women in the United States has a family member in prison.³ Among black women, this number rises to two in five.⁴

The family burden of incarceration falls disproportionately on women — especially black and Latino women — and on families that are low-income and poor.⁵ According to a report from the Ella Baker Center for Human Rights, Forward Together, and Research Action Design entitled *Who Pays? The True Cost of Incarceration on Families*, in an overwhelming majority of cases, family members were primarily responsible for the costs associated with having a loved one arrested and/or incarcerated — everything from lawyers’ fees, to court-imposed fines, to collect calls and visiting expenses.⁶ Eighty-three percent of these family members were women.⁷ Further, the report also found that the fiscal costs associated with a family member’s incarceration left half of those affected struggling to meet basic needs and more than a third in debt.⁸

As of 2013, more than 54,000 juveniles were incarcerated in juvenile detention, correction, or other residential facilities.⁹ While this represents a significant decrease from highs in the 1990s, the U.S. still locks up far more of its children than do other countries — 18 times more than France and five times more than South Africa, for instance.¹⁰ Given these numbers, it may not be surprising that a movement of family members — particularly mothers — is developing around the country, a movement that aims to challenge both the conditions in which their loved ones are held and the fact of mass incarceration itself. This report reflects an initial effort to map that movement and to distill the shared wisdom of its leaders.

“If you want to make change in a community, you go to the women,” *The New Jim Crow* author Michelle Alexander has said. That is what we have done in researching this report. While we did not limit our investigation to women leaders — we spoke to fathers and other male relatives who have assumed leadership in the battle for freedom — we found that mothers

comprised the majority within the burgeoning family-led movement to transform the juvenile justice system and the way the larger criminal justice system deals with the needs of young people. (Most of the groups we spoke with focus on juvenile justice, but the criminal justice system operates on a continuum, with many juvenile prisoners going on to adult facilities as they come of age. Given this, we also spoke with groups that define their mission more broadly to include families with members in juvenile and adult facilities.)

As a debate about crime and justice that has been a long time in the making gains steam across the country, the nation is beginning to pay attention to the impact of incarceration on families. But even as families struggle to gain visibility, what remains to be told is the story of the growing family-led *movement*. It is a story of collective struggle in the face of crushing pressure from institutions with nearly unlimited power — an insistence to be heard at the political as well as the personal level.

In researching this report, we spoke with 14 family leaders in nine states. They spoke of the pervasive stigma that comes with having a family member behind bars — the sense, as one family activist put it, that “those who love those who have done wrong ought to be shamed and blamed.” They described walls of bureaucracy, red tape, and silence that compounded the distance imposed by physical walls. They told us of the lasting hurt their children experienced; wounds that remained open long after a sentence had been served.

They also described personal journeys from isolation, shame, and helplessness to collective power, even in the face of tremendous obstacles. Their love for their children — and their conviction that a better response to juvenile misdeeds was not only possible but essential to community well-being — shone through every word of testimony that was shared with great courage.

Our use of prisons to deal with everything from serious acts of violence to minor affronts to authority relies on a particularly American premise: that a child who breaks the law becomes in that moment a radical individual, connected to no one, “accountable” only to an abstract notion of the state — and that our response to a child’s law-breaking affects only that child. The stories we heard from family leaders across the country not only challenge the over-use of incarceration. These stories undercut the individualistic ideology that permits and sustains mass incarceration by showing us that “delinquents” or

“juvenile offenders” are integral parts of families and communities.

Mass incarceration — and the racial and economic inequities that fuel it — is increasingly becoming a civil rights issue and is perhaps even the greatest civil rights issue of our time. The various civil rights battles of our nation (and beyond) have historically been led by those most affected. In this context, it may not be an overstatement to say that the moment has come for the mamas to make history.

Some family leaders have moved from the kitchen table to the conference room, launching successful organizations to which political leaders increasingly find themselves accountable. Others are still in the process of discovering — through their children’s experience and that of their neighbors — what goes on behind the bars of juvenile facilities. Many are just beginning to bring their energies to bear on systemic issues as well as those that their own children face on a daily basis.

In Missouri, nationally renowned for its forward-thinking juvenile justice system, Tracy McClard is building a statewide network to challenge the practice of charging juveniles as adults. She does this even as she struggles to keep her own devastated family afloat after her 17-year-old son hung himself in a holding cell upon learning that he would be transferred to the adult system.

In Texas, Tarsha Jackson watched as her 11-year-old son was drawn into the state’s troubled juvenile system after he broke a \$50 window. In the three years he spent locked up, her son was neglected, abused, and sexually assaulted — and, as it would be revealed, so were thousands of other youths in the state’s custody. Jackson founded Texas Families of Incarcerated Youth (TFIY), which played a key role in uncovering widespread sexual abuse inside Texas youth prisons — revelations that would lead to a massive overhaul of the state system.

In Oakland and other California cities, the Essie Justice Group explicitly uses a “healing to advocacy” model to support leadership among women with incarcerated family members. Initially, small groups offer peer support around nuts-and-bolts issues, such as visiting rules and how to get money into commissary. Over time, the bonds the women form become the basis for collective political action.

In Silicon Valley, Raj Jayadev and his allies have formalized a similar process, “making the family an essential part of the defense team so they can change the outcome and landscape of power in the courtroom”. Jayadev observed that this is accomplished by building “a community out of what would otherwise be an isolating and intimidating

process.”

Using a model they have dubbed “participatory defense,” members of Jayadev’s Albert Cobarrubias Justice Project (ACJP) work together to support under-resourced public defenders in strengthening a family member’s case. They also help tell stories, using photography and video to give judges a window into defendants’ role within their families — underscoring, as Sister Helen Prejean famously said, the truth that “a man is more than his worst act.”

When a family member comes home, ACJP members enact a simple ceremony — a family member picks up an eraser and removes that person’s name from the list of defendants that forms a silent centerpiece to the group’s buzzing office. What this moment means, said Jayadev, is not only that an individual has been made free but that “a family has been made whole.”

The ACJP crew measures its impact using a rubric they call “time saved” — a figure they reach by subtracting the number of years participants ultimately serve from those prosecutors originally sought. The total at last count stood at 1,862 years of “intergenerational suffering eliminated through the power, will, and intellect of families.”

“If you see a line winding out the courtroom door of your city, know that those people are not just the fodder of mass incarceration on a conveyer belt to jail or prison,” Jayadev explained. “They are potentially the founding mothers and fathers of a new movement that may change the way justice is experienced and exercised in America forever.”



Photo credited to Brooke Anderson.
Retrieved from www.ellabakercenter.org/about/about-us.

SECTION I: KEY FINDINGS

“My son called me the next day and said, ‘Mommy, they moved me and I don’t think you can come this far.’ I said, ‘No matter where they send you, I’m going to find you.’”

— Jeannette Bocanegra,
Community Connections for Youth

Organizations led by, and composed of, family members of incarcerated youth have been forming around the country over the last decade. Our goal in researching this report was to listen to their stories and experiences and to learn from them what they need to keep growing and to be effective in transforming an abusive juvenile justice system.

These initial interviews by no means include every family leader or touch on every key issue, but they hold significant insights into how families are transforming the juvenile justice system and what allies and funders can do to support this growing movement.

The following are our key findings:

1. The activism of our Family Justice Leaders empowers families of incarcerated youth and provides them a voice with which to advocate on the behalf of their loved ones. Our Family Justice Leaders achieve this by:

- amplifying the unique perspectives of family members and ensuring that they have a seat at the table;
- working with families to counteract stigmas against young people who are arrested or incarcerated, as well as their family members; and
- resisting the impulse to tokenize families.

2. Our Family Justice Leaders focus on challenging the juvenile justice system to effect enduring positive change for those involved, rather than the reverse. They are pursuing concrete policy goals and initiatives, specifically:

- enacting sentencing reform; working with families to counteract stigmas against young people who are arrested or incarcerated, as well as their family members; and
- raising the age at which juveniles can be transferred to adult facilities and abolishing adult transfer altogether;
- ending life without parole for juveniles;
- breaking the school-to-prison pipeline;

- ending the use of solitary confinement;
- improving the conditions in juvenile facilities;
- strengthening family ties by improving visiting rules and telephone access; and
- advancing justice reinvestment.

3. Our Family Justice Leaders engage in a number of organizational strategies to gain public awareness and achieve their legislative and public policy goals, including:

- advocacy training;
- practical assistance in increasing family engagement; and
- lobbying and activism.

4. To sustain and advance their work, our Family Justice Leaders need assistance in three core areas:

- communication services — including storytelling resources, op-ed development training and placement, media messaging, website and social media assistance, and coordination by a dedicated communications director;
- greater outreach to build the juvenile justice reform movement; and
- increased funding.

SECTION II: FAMILY INVOLVEMENT

Most of the family justice leaders we interviewed are parents of incarcerated youth or young adults who were incarcerated as youth, who became involved in family-led advocacy through direct experience. Most faced dramatic obstacles and hardships as they tried to navigate an unjust juvenile prison system.

Each leader provided important reflections on the emotional trauma associated with having a loved one in the criminal justice system, as well as the depth of the system's inequities and abuses. These reflections were apparent from their interviews, especially as they described how they came to be involved in juvenile justice advocacy. Each leader stressed the importance of family leadership but also emphasized how important the larger community is — and a broad definition of “family” — to the movement of families of incarcerated youth.

Sue Badeau emphasized that families and youth bring valuable skills to the table, along with the lived experience of incarceration. “It’s critical,” she said, “to bring youth and family in with genuine expertise for change, such as: public relations expertise; bookkeeping experience; great teachers; those who know how to help keeping facilities clean, etc. It should never be tokenism. Families and youth have jobs and knowledge and careers and other things that are important for our strategies for change.”

This section continues with Grace Bauer-Lubow and Corey’s story, which exemplifies the deeply personal reasons that families are brought to advocacy. The second part of this section details the ways in which family-led advocacy empowers and cultivates family voice, increasing chances for real change.

GRACE AND COREY: PART 2

The more Grace learned more about Corey’s situation, the more horrified she became.

Tallulah, as the facility was called, was not the “program” she had been promised; it was one of the worst prisons in the country. Despite an ongoing Department of Justice investigation that found dozens of youth leaving Tallulah for the hospital with serious injuries each month, the prison remained open.

Grace’s first priority was clear — to get Corey out of there. With the help of a lawyer working pro bono, she convinced the court to place Corey closer to home — but not before he had suffered trauma that haunts him to this day.

After what she had seen, Grace was not willing to stop with just getting her own son out of Tallulah — not while thousands of other mothers’ children were still being brutalized every day. Her attorney told her about a parents’ group that was part of the Juvenile Justice Project of Louisiana, and Grace joined their ranks. Before long she was testifying before the legislature, strategizing with civil rights lawyers, and doing everything she could think of to make sure no parent remained as naïve as she had been when she advised her son to confess, without a lawyer, so he could get “help” at a place where he found only violence and brutality.

When testimony from parents and others spurred the Department of Justice, for the first time in history, to join the lawsuit to shut down a privately-operated state juvenile prison, that was the beginning of the end for Tallulah. The Louisiana legislature had no choice but to fold their cards, passing a bill that emptied, finally, the torture chamber that had been a cash cow for the governor and his cronies on the outside — and a living hell for the children on the inside.

EMPOWERING FAMILIES:

DEVELOPING A PRACTICE FOR CULTIVATING FAMILY VOICE

“You’re part of the same club and it’s nice to feel you’re not the only member. Being in contact with other families face-to-face is very healing.”

— Tracy McClard, Families and Friends Organizing for Reform of Juvenile Justice

Established in 2000, FFLIC — Families and Friends of Louisiana’s Incarcerated Children — is one of the oldest and most established of the groups. It is often looked to as a model of family-driven activism.

Executive Director Gina Womack cited personal transformation and leadership development as central to FFLIC’s mission. “We believe that when people are respected and able to actually participate in their own lives and their children’s lives, change happens,” said Womack. “People get more hopeful. People lose hope when they stop fighting.”

Hearing from Families

The importance of family voice was a shared value among all the groups interviewed. Family leaders stressed the importance of including families in all levels of decision-making — not simply as a “feel-good” measure for the families or in tokenizing ways but as the only authentic means of developing effective policies and practices.

As Womack put it, “We’re trying to get a place where the needs of families are met, and if nobody ever asks, you won’t know. You’ll get something with good intentions but it doesn’t solve the root causes. If the people affected are at the table, you might get closer to solutions... Affected people are going to bring a different lens, and if you shut out their opinions, you’re not going to solve the problems because you don’t know what problems are.”

Additionally, Womack noted, “We’re trying to get parents to train other parents. We believe a parent will pick up on and learn technique coming from a peer as opposed to a practitioner. You can’t tell me what to do with no lived experience.”

Tracy McClard of the Missouri-based Families and Friends Organizing for Reform of Juvenile Justice (FORJ-MO) described a set of “family engagement principles” that guide her group’s efforts: “Families are self-defined, not tokens. You

have to know what the stories are and what the needs are. Approach the families not as victims but as resources; they are knowledgeable.”

Counteracting Stigma

“The shame and the isolation you feel, you feel like Public Enemy No. 1. You need to connect with other families.”

— Tracey Wells-Huggins, Renewed Minds

Nearly every family advocate interviewed spoke of the corrosive power of the stigma surrounding arrest and incarceration. Counteracting that stigma, they resolved, was a prerequisite both to empowering individual family members and creating a space in which their voices and experiences could be taken seriously.

Grace Bauer-Lubow, co-founder of Justice for Families, described how the stigma surrounding an incarceration functioned to blind even those closest to her to the depth of her loss and her need for support as she battled for her son. “Everybody around me, including my family, said, ‘Well, you know, this is what you get when you’re in trouble,’” recalled Bauer-Lubow, whose son showed signs of beatings each time she went to visit him at the now-closed Tallulah facility. “The folks closest to me either didn’t understand how bad it was or they didn’t understand that that [blame and stigma] was not going to help him to get better. They made it like, ‘Well this is part of the punishment.’”

Sue Badeau, who serves on the Board of Justice for Families, agreed. She is the mother to 22 children, adopted and biological — two of whom got caught up in the juvenile justice system. The most significant stigma, she believed, is the perception that anyone who gets involved with the justice system “deserves it and that they’re bad people.” She elaborated, “There’s no nuance or gray area to that standing; it’s a ‘good people, bad people’ sort of thing.”

The stigma attached to incarceration extends directly to parents, according to Badeau. One of the most dangerous myths about families, Badeau said, is the notion that “whatever the problem is, the parents are the cause of it, so therefore it’s not beneficial, or not helpful, to work with families... If you get them involved, or let the young person have time with their family, that’s only going to exacerbate the problem and make things worse.”

This attitude of blame, Badeau asserted, is sometimes wielded to deter family involvement. Families “who want to be involved, who are knocking on the door...are perceived in a way that says, ‘You’re the problem; go away.’”

Nevertheless, representation of family members in discussions about their children and the institutions that hold their children functions, among other purposes, to counteract the stigma. Ensuring that parents have a seat at the table,

Womack proposed, can be a means of shifting the locus of blame: “When parents advocate for their children, they can hold systems accountable, rather than people only holding families and children accountable.”

Dolores Canales, the co-founder of California Families Against Solitary Confinement (CFASC), explained that “bigger picture” this way: “A lot of times it’s an issue of being an outcast because of the poverty that they’re actually enduring.”

Among other efforts to fight the stigma, FFLIC is beginning to develop a campaign to “let kids be kids.” It will highlight the voices of young people talking not only about the experience of incarceration, but also about the myriad laws that constrain their experience of childhood — and the underlying conditions in high-incarceration communities.

“We have all these expectations of kids in school. But in some communities, they don’t have clean drinking water,” Womack reasoned. “When we keep families in poverty we’re denying kids the potential to be kids.”

Resisting Tokenization

Tracey Wells-Huggins’s son was arrested for suspected gang activity when he was 14, having watched as a fight erupted on a street corner.

He was eventually cleared of all charges, but the experience revealed to Wells-Huggins how vulnerable families are in interacting with and navigating the juvenile justice system. Guided by such a strong personal mandate, Wells-Huggins created a family-oriented and family-led organization called Renewed Minds. The organization strives to treat families as knowledgeable resources in the struggle for juvenile justice. According to Wells-Huggins, “We [families of incarcerated youth] need to be seen as partners.”

That is the approach favored by Womack, Bauer-Lubow, and other family justice leaders who have given thought to the notion of genuine empowerment. They are especially wary of the risk of tokenizing or “speaking for” family members that comes along with gathering personal stories in political debates. “Our desire is not to ‘give families a voice,’ because people already have voices,” Womack clarified. It’s “to give them a space to articulate those voices. We try to take people where they are and provide spaces to grow and thrive.”

“There can be just such a range of the expertise that families and youth bring,” reaffirmed Badeau. “Family members are not one-dimensional. They have jobs and careers and education backgrounds and volunteer histories and other things about who they are that also contribute to... improving both our systems and our community.”



GRACE AND COREY: PART 3

Grace Bauer-Lubow’s frank eloquence soon had her speaking around the country about subjects she wished she had never had to learn, carrying with her the voices of dozens, then hundreds of families she met along the way. She became an accomplished advocate and leader, headlining rallies and testifying before Congress about widespread rape in juvenile facilities.

Ultimately, together with Zachary Norris (now of the Ella Baker Center for Human Rights), she launched Justice for Families, a national network of parents of incarcerated children.

Her own greatest source of support came from the parents like herself she met during her travels — and there were thousands, some with children who had been carried out of “reformatories” in body bags after being beaten to death, or driven to suicide. They came from every state in the nation, and every kind of background, but they had two main things in common: a fierce devotion to their children and a determination to change a juvenile justice system that was destroying the very children it was charged with reforming.

The parents Grace met had something else in common as well: They had all been treated like criminals themselves as they fought to save their children — by police and prison guards first, but also by neighbors, friends, and even members of their own families.

To Grace, these mothers and fathers were heroes, devoting their lives to fighting for their children and the children of others. If the nation’s scandal-ridden juvenile justice system was ever to going to change, people were going to have to start listening to the families. “We are not heartless people who don’t care about our kids,” Grace said emphatically. “We are not lousy parents. Quit portraying us as monsters, and start letting us help.”

SECTION III: CHANGING POLICY AND PRACTICE: POLICY GOALS AND INITIATIVES

“I thought we could trust the system that holds parents accountable, but what they actually did was abuse my son and did things to him that no parent could do without being arrested. I’d see him with rug burns on his face — a tactic used as regular punishment — and other abuse. There’s so much money being spent on incarcerating our kids and they come back uneducated and isolated, abused.”

— Jeannette Bocanegra,
Community Connections for Youth

While some groups focus most or all of their energy on supporting families in advocating for individual loved ones, most combine that effort with a larger organizing agenda aimed at changing policies. Specific issues varied slightly from region to region, but several proposals emerged that are very much in line with the broader movement against mass incarceration.

1. Enacting sentencing reform

“Incarceration is not the way to correct bad behavior with kids. Families are told it starts at home. It doesn’t always start at home. It’s systemic”

— Tarsha Jackson,
Texas Organizing Project
and formerly Texas Families of
Incarcerated Youth

A major goal, unsurprisingly, was to amend the laws that send young people to prison in the first place. Juvenile incarceration

is currently down 50 percent from its high point in the 1980s.¹¹ While the United States still far outstrips every other nation on the planet in its use of juvenile incarceration, this certainly indicates progress on the goals the family justice organizations are pursuing.¹²

Black, Native American and Latino youth continue to be over-represented in the incarcerated juvenile population.¹³

Because the laws that drive sentencing are generally set at the state level, many groups work with state lawmakers or otherwise rally for state-level legislation to impact sentencing. For example, FFLIC is working toward full implementation of a law that advocates for community-based alternatives — programs or interventions that keep kids in their homes rather than placing them in distant, locked facilities — and keeping families at the center of their children’s treatment.

2. Raise the age for adult transfer and stop it altogether

“[My son] Jonathan’s experience taught me that no child should be placed with adults no matter what, because when children are put in with adults they die — physically or mentally. I also believe that all kids deserve a second chance. As a parent, one of the most frustrating things for me was that the court, the judges, and the prosecutors didn’t know my son — they hadn’t raised him like I had. They didn’t even know him as a person — but they weren’t willing to give him the second chance they might have given to their own kids if they were in the same situation.”¹⁴

— Tracy McClard, Families and Friends
Organizing for Reform of Juvenile Justice,
excerpted from testimony to the U.S. House
Committee on Education and Labor

A subset of organizations — generally run by parents of children tried as adults or sent to adult prisons — concentrated on “adult transfer” laws, which allow prosecutors and/or judges to steer some juveniles directly into the adult criminal justice system.

Lois DeMott of Citizens for Prison Reform told the story of her son, Kevin:

“He was in the juvenile system previously, but this time he was given a blended sentence at 13 and went into the adult system at 15 when he failed a program in Iowa. My child had been institutionalized most of the time since he was just 11 years old. He had signs of emotional impairments and mental health problems since very young, and we started seeking help even then. When he went back into the system at age 15, I didn’t realize that in Michigan at that time we put our youth in with the adults. My child was incarcerated with adults up to age 26 in cells with prisoners over age 18. After seven months he significantly deteriorated.”

While incarcerated with adults, DeMott shared, Kevin witnessed horrific things, including a man who cut open his own stomach and played with his intestines.

DeMott related that she had felt blindsided and overwhelmed by the lack of information about the system and the level of abuse her child was experiencing. She said that it was Kevin who urged her to learn to advocate for him, other incarcerated youth, and mentally ill adult prisoners.

She co-founded Citizens for Prison Reform with Kevin while he was incarcerated. Citizens for Prison Reform is now a vibrant group that organizes monthly educational meetings, supports families, puts forward legislative strategies, launches letter-writing campaigns, and builds bridges between family members and the Michigan Department of Corrections.

JONATHAN’S STORY

Tracy McClard’s son Jonathan had his whole life ahead of him. Jonathan was an avid reader who was excited about using his last years of high school to prepare for college and a career. However, things took a dramatic turn later that summer. Jonathan got into a fight with another youth and shot him.

He was arrested and transferred to facility after facility, awaiting his certification hearing. Jonathan experienced physical abuse and emotional trauma during his detention. While in a psychiatric unit of a juvenile detention center, he was put on a number of medications and then denied access to these medications after a subsequent transfer.

Then Jonathan and his mother saw a faint glimmer of hope: Jonathan was eligible for Missouri’s Dual Jurisdiction Program, which would have allowed him to spend time in a juvenile detention facility until his 21st birthday. Then it would be decided whether he would best benefit from parole or additional time in the adult system.

Despite support from a Department of Youth Services representative, the judge presiding over Jonathan’s case categorically denied him access to the program.

Instead, Jonathan was sentenced to 30 years in the adult prison system. Two months later, on January 4, 2008 — just after his 17th birthday — distraught over the impending transfer to the adult prison, Jonathan hanged himself. In the span of six months, Jonathan had gone from being excited about his future to being too distraught to live.

Tracy McClard of FORJ-MO became an advocate after her 17-year-old son Jonathan committed suicide on the eve of his transfer to an adult prison.

Because of this experience, much of McClard’s work as an advocate has prioritized limiting adult transfer and ensuring that more young people have access to Missouri’s unique state-level juvenile facilities, which are much smaller than traditional juvenile prisons. These facilities operate on a relationship-based model that includes families rather than stigmatizing them. They are looked to as a model by other states and jurisdictions interested in reforming their own systems.

McClard and FORJ-MO are currently working to pass legislation that raises the age at which a defendant is automatically considered an adult (from 17 to 18 in Missouri) and to ensure that juveniles cannot be held in adult jails prior to being sentenced. They have already succeeded in passing “Jonathan’s Law,” which is named for McClard’s son. The law makes more juveniles who have been certified as adults eligible for Missouri’s dual jurisdiction program. This allows them to begin their sentences in a juvenile institution and to avoid adult prison entirely if they respond to the treatment provided in the state’s therapeutic juvenile facilities.

3. *End life without parole*

In 2012, the Supreme Court ruled that mandatory sentences of life without parole for acts committed while a youth is under age 18 were unconstitutional.¹⁵ Nevertheless, state laws still allow for juveniles to be subjected to this brutal sentence as long as the sentence is discretionary rather than mandatory — meaning that judges can still impose the sentence when they see fit.¹⁶

Jennifer Erschabek found her purpose in helping families advocate for incarcerated family members, organizing for parole reform, and working to end excessive and harsh prison sentences.

Erschabek's son Nick was arrested and charged with murder in 2002. The subsequent trauma left her with overwhelming uncertainty about what to do and where to turn. What Erschabek did know was that she needed help to become her son's advocate. As a result, she joined the Texas Inmate Families Association (TIFA) and eventually became its executive director. Under her leadership the group is actively involved in the struggle to eliminate the possibility of life without parole for those who committed crimes before the age of 25.

Along with the Sentencing Project and other advocacy groups in Texas, Erschabek and TIFA are seeking parole reform that would include a "second look" for young offenders. They are fighting for the right of those sentenced harshly before the age of 25 to go before judicial decision-makers for a sentence reduction after completing 15 or 20 years of their sentence. They are also focusing on other reforms, including compassionate release and due diligence credit for work, school, and rehabilitation efforts.

4. *Halt the school-to-prison pipeline*

"To spit out gum at home is not a crime, but at school it is."

— Tarsha Jackson,
Texas Organizing Project
and formerly Texas Families of
Incarcerated Youth

Most of the family members we spoke to recognized the problems inherent in the rise of "zero tolerance" policies and other disciplinary practices that accelerate what has come to be called "the school to prison pipeline."¹⁷ Harsher school discipline has been rising even as overall juvenile detention has declined.¹⁸ According to the Justice Policy Institute, the increased reliance on out-of-school suspensions, expulsions and police in schools can result in more contact with the juvenile justice system as kids are suspended and expelled for

small offenses such as talking back to teachers and skipping class.¹⁹

Gina Womack, Tracey Wells-Huggins, Tarsha Jackson, Community Connections for Youth's Jeannette Bocanegra, and the Ella Baker Center for Human Rights's Zachary Norris emphasized advocacy that gets at root problems, including what happens in schools to criminalize children. Bocanegra's son and Jackson's son were both initially arrested in school for minor status offenses — that is, for minor offenses like disruptive behavior, or truancy, which are not considered crimes for adults. Yet, these arrests began an enmeshment with the juvenile prison system.

Community Connections for Youth (CCY) sponsors local school violence prevention programs and an "Alternatives to Suspension" program. Jeannette Bocanegra's recently returned son, JahPower, is starting a program in which he will talk about his story and the risks of getting trapped in the juvenile prison system in various middle schools.

5. *Improve conditions in juvenile facilities*

"When this [the arrest] happened with my son, I was very, very much afraid of what could happen to him, what was happening with my child, who society didn't see as a kid. I'm still afraid. Not just for what could have happened to him, but for every child of color that I see. I'm afraid for them, but fear is a great motivator."

— Tracey Wells-Huggins, Renewed Minds

This is another area where many family justice advocates are working along dual tracks: Even as they advocate for alternatives to incarceration that would allow young people to remain in the community, they also work to improve life for those behind bars.

Sue Badeau identified improving conditions for currently incarcerated youth as one of several preliminary goals on the path towards ultimately securing alternatives to incarceration for youth. Badeau stressed the need for "improving the conditions that young people and their families face when they're involved in that system while...improving access to services that actually create benefits and improve outcomes."

Michael McIntosh echoed Badeau's sentiment. Michael McIntosh is the founder of Friends and Families of Youth Incarcerated at Walnut Grove in Mississippi. His son Mike was an inmate at Walnut Grove Youth Correctional Facility, a privately-run, for-profit facility that also housed adults at the

time. A riot occurred there two months into Mike's sentence. McIntosh was unable to locate his son until more than six weeks of searching finally brought him to his son's bedside at Greenwood Hospital where he lay mostly immobile, having been badly injured in the riot. Mike had suffered brain damage, was partially paralyzed, and had been temporarily blinded.

McIntosh was appalled by the gross negligence of the prison staff and the brutal conditions that both adolescent and adult inmates experienced there. Decrying the youths' limited access to educational opportunities, rampant abuse, and barbaric prison conditions, McIntosh and the other family members in Friends and Families of Youth Incarcerated at Walnut Grove struggled to improve prison conditions with the objective: "We will be the voices of our children."

In 2010, The Department of Justice launched an investigation into the reports of abusive practices at the Walnut Grove Youth Correctional Facility. The facility settled a federal lawsuit against it, filed by the Southern Poverty Law Center in 2012, which resulted in a consent decree removing juveniles from the facility and ending solitary confinement for juveniles.²⁰

6. End the use of solitary confinement

The United Nations Special Rapporteur on Torture has defined the use of solitary confinement of any duration as torture when applied to juveniles, and a number of Senate leaders have echoed its call to end the practice.

President Obama issued an executive order in 2016 placing limits on the use of solitary confinement in federal juvenile prisons.²¹ While this represents an important symbolic victory, most underage prisoners are held in state or local facilities, which are not subject to the federal mandate, and the practice of holding teenagers in solitary confinement remains widespread.

After Lois DeMott's son Kevin experienced years of abuse and deterioration in both the juvenile and the adult prison system, he was again placed in solitary at age 18. This time Kevin's mental health deteriorated so badly he was suicidal. While in solitary, Kevin was "hog-tied" several times. He was unable to get to the toilet during these times and was forced to lie in his own waste, without electricity, without even a mattress, for up to 30 days at a time.

Dolores Canales had previously been an inmate herself. When her son John was arrested at the age of 18, she knew all too well what kind of conditions awaited him behind bars. At the Pelican Bay State Prison in California, the conditions — including the use of indefinite solitary confinement — were so abusive that in 2011 her son and 6,000 other inmates across several California prisons waged a hunger strike.²²

Dolores and other supporters on the outside fasted and protested in solidarity. The prisoners' demands included the elimination of group punishment, modification of punishment

tied to gang-affiliation status, and ending long-term solitary confinement. They also wanted equally modest humanitarian concessions like adequate food, phone calls once a week, and exercise.

When most of those demands were not met, Dolores helped to found California Families Against Solitary Confinement (CAFSC).

It took two more hunger strikes for any modest reforms to be achieved. Inmates were granted the use of typewriters, limited access to college courses, and the right to send a photo to a loved one.²³ In response to a federal lawsuit that followed the strikes in 2012, the California Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation eased criteria for sending those accused of "gang affiliation" to segregated housing and implemented a "Step Down" program that reduces the length of confinement in steps.²⁴ CFASC continues to lobby for reforms and the eventual abolishment of solitary confinement in California.

7. Strengthen family ties by improving communication

Visiting rights and phone calls are important issues for families with a loved one behind bars. Visiting hours are often strictly limited and collect call charges make phone communication prohibitively expensive for many — despite a recent mandate from the Federal Communications Commission (FCC) that reduces rate caps for local, in-state, and interstate calls by up to 50 percent.²⁵ That mandate was partially stayed before it was scheduled to take effect on March 17, 2016, pending the result of a petition for a court review.²⁶

Studies have shown that regular family visits and other communication can dramatically reduce recidivism rates for juveniles.²⁷ Youth who have family visits have significantly fewer behavior incidents per month during incarceration, as well as improved school performance.²⁸

Jeannette Bocanegra's son JahPower was 14 years old when he was arrested and sentenced to six years of incarceration. He spent two years in juvenile detention and then four years in adult prison, experiencing abuse and solitary confinement in various facilities. To make matters worse, he was sent increasingly far from home, making visitations extremely difficult and expensive.

For young JahPower, visiting days with his mother and father were what sustained him, allowing him to retain his humanity. However, both JahPower and his family experienced prolonged and heightened stress as he was transferred almost insurmountable distances from home, often without his family being informed where he was being taken. The expense and distance were overwhelming for his parents. Nevertheless, they resolved to find him and visit him wherever he was, whatever the obstacle.

Bocanegra vowed to find answers not just for her family, but also for others. She joined Community Connections for Youth where she learned how to better understand and navigate the

juvenile justice system so that she could advocate for her son. She and CCY have helped countless other families learn how to engage probation officers and assist in getting families to visiting days, among other services.

Jennifer Erschabek and TIFA work to increase communications with families as part of their advocacy for better educational opportunities and outcomes behind bars. TIFA and CCY individually promote family involvement with parole board hearings, assist families in getting to prisons, and help with any medications and treatments incarcerated youth may need. These practical activities not only benefit young people while they are locked up but also strengthen bonds with family members in order to make reentry more successful.

Family engagement is critical for addressing the considerable mental health needs of incarcerated youth. According to the Mental Health Association in New York State (MHANYS), inmates in juvenile prisons are 20 percent more likely than the general youth population to have “serious emotional disorders”.²⁹ In its 2013 Report on Juvenile Justice, Mental Health and Family Engagement, MHANYS found that family communication and engagement are necessary on many fronts, from providing background on and insight into a child’s mental health history to being the key to effective treatment delivery during incarceration and reentry. MHANYS found that juveniles respond better to mental health treatment when families are involved.

Gina Clayton of the Essie Justice Group discussed the need to change specific conditions, such as strict and often hard-to-understand rules regarding what a visitor can wear to prison visits and intimidating searches that may deter visitation. It is essential, she advised, to be able touch and be close to incarcerated loved ones during visits.

8. Advance justice reinvestment

Many of the family justice organizations adopt a broader view of their primary mission to address juvenile incarceration, using their platform to tackle bigger picture questions of equity and opportunity.

These organizations advocate for some form of “justice reinvestment” — that is, investing funds that would otherwise be used to incarcerate young people in education, drug treatment, employment training, and general services in underserved high-incarceration neighborhoods.

The Ella Baker Center exemplifies this kind of bigger-picture organizing. Family advocacy is at the heart of the Ella Baker Center’s work, but it also pursues what Executive Director Zachary Norris calls a “books not bars, jobs not jails, healthcare not handcuffs agenda.”



Photo courtesy of Families and Friends of Louisiana’s Incarcerated Children. Retrieved from www.ffcic.org/resources/media/photo-galleries.



Photo courtesy of the Albert Cobarrubias Justice Project. Retrieved from <http://acjusticeproject.org>.



Photo credited to Finley Coyl. Retrieved from www.ellabakercenter.org/our-work/help-proposition-47-benefit-our-communities.



Photo courtesy of Citizens for Prison Reform. Retrieved from www.micpr.org.

JAHPOWER'S STORY

My family and friends call me Jahppy, born in the Bronx. I come from a large family of nine. I'm the youngest out of all my siblings. I live with both my parents.

I've been home from prison for two months.

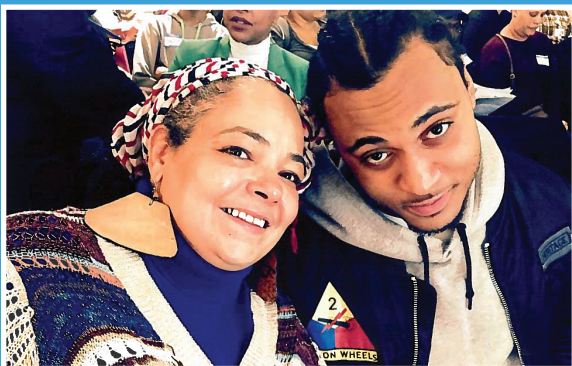
By the time I turned 20 years old, I was a resident at four different adult facilities and three juvenile facilities far away from home. I endured years without home, without my family, without holidays, birthdays, or my mom's cooking. I endured years without safety.

By the age of 16, I was exposed to the adult prison and witnessed abuse by both inmates and correction officers, gang violence, and much more. I realized that racism is real and it still exists. I noticed that most of the men were blacks and Latinos. I am both.

I had to grow up faster than the average 16-year-old kid. Feeling lonely, afraid, away from home, surviving and returning home was all I wanted. During the years that I was incarcerated, I had no opportunity for rehabilitation and I had to learn how to live in a cruel world. Much of the abuse I witnessed was from the people we are supposed to trust the most. But they pepper sprayed, made extra tight handcuffs until your thumbs were numb, and did horrible things. This was making me hard and angry and sometimes hopeless.

I looked forward to the weekly visits from my family, I dreamed of being home. That's all I had to keep me alive, but not free.

I dreamed and hoped that my family would not give up on me. I kept getting transferred farther and farther from home.



JahPower Simon and his mother Jeannette Bocanegra

I was sentenced to one to four years and sent to Rikers Island, where I completed 15 months of my time. But then I was transferred to Greene Correctional Facility, two and a half hours away from home. Again, I experienced even more abuse and gang violence. I was assigned a counselor who did nothing to intervene.

After four months at Greene I was transferred to another prison. I was now very far away from home — how could my family get to me? I was so sure I would not see my family again. My parents are getting older and my father was fighting cancer. But they came. They said they would always find me.

The treatment I received was aggressive and inhumane at the faraway prison. I was not encouraged to be a better person — and forget about getting an education. I was there for nine months, and was transferred again to another facility. This was once again even farther away from home. They didn't tell my mother where they were sending me.

Lakeview sounds pretty, but this prison would break the mental state of anyone. I was given six months in solitary confinement. All I was thinking about was my visits with my family and the hours it would take them to get to where I was. I felt like not only my freedom, but also my family was being taken away from me. I needed to feel normal and human. Twenty-three hours a day, seven days a week for six months, listening only to yelling, screaming, jingling of keys, and the sound of heavy iron doors was driving me insane. Finally I heard my department of corrections number and my last name: "Pack up your belongings, you're leaving."

Then they moved me again. This time to Malone, New York, which is almost in Canada. I remember my mother saying to me, "No matter how far they send you, I'll be right there with you."

Violence was all I was exposed to. Prison is no place like home and adult jails are no place for kids.

Solitary confinement is a cruel mental punishment that should be shut down. Locking kids up is not a lesson to be learned. It is more harmful than the wrong choices made. Taking me away from home was not the solution.

I am grateful and appreciate being back home. I feel loved welcome and blessed. I am home.

SECTION IV: STRATEGIES

“What drove me always was how badly this ended up when all I was trying to do was do the right thing... My son was struggling. I didn’t know how to help him. Everything I had done so far had failed... Had there just been one mama there saying, ‘You know what, my kid went off to that facility and he wasn’t getting enough to eat, he didn’t get an education, he got beat up on....’ To me, that was always what drove me... If there’s another mama like me looking for help, we’re going to put ourselves out there. I’m going to put myself out there in a way that they can find me, so I can tell them what I know so this doesn’t happen to someone else.”

— **Grace Bauer-Lubow,**
Justice for Families

The family justice organizations employ varying strategies to achieve public awareness, legislative change, and various policy goals. Such strategies include advocacy training for families, practical assistance in increasing family engagement in all stages of a youth’s involvement with the system, and lobbying and public education.

Advocacy Training

Community Connections for Youth (CCY), reported Jeannette Bocanegra, mobilizes faith and neighborhood organizations to develop effective, community-based alternatives to incarceration. According to Bocanegra, increasing the capacity of local communities “to work with youth in the justice system is the key to reducing youth crime and delinquency and improving long-term life outcomes for youth.”

“Monthly support group sessions,” said Bocanegra, “are part of our strategy for change. We bring in advocacy organizations and look at all that we can bring into the work we are doing,” including “mental health, housing, [and] education.”

Families and Friends of Louisiana’s Incarcerated Children (FFLIC)’s primary strategy for transformation is family-led

advocacy. “We try to ensure that people connecting with families are families. Our fight is that people impacted should have positions and jobs that family members can go to.”

Providing Assistance to Increase Family Engagement

“People go to court with no hope. We’ve got to learn the language of the system so they can’t do what they’re doing.”

— **Michael McIntosh,** Friends and Families of
Youth Incarcerated at Walnut Grove

The family justice leaders expressed the importance of creating safe spaces where family members can engage with each other, thus preparing them to be more effective advocates for their children. Many of the organizations facilitate connections among families, as well as between parents and their incarcerated children.

“Through our monthly meetings, parents are able to share what they are experiencing and feel safe sharing their pain. It’s a non-judgmental space. We all need community,” Bocanegra shared. She and others observed that sharing their stories privately in a supportive environment helps family members build the confidence to share their stories publicly.

Community Connections for Youth is active on visiting days at the jails, in the schools, and out in the community. Its members train grassroots faith and neighborhood organizations to effectively engage youth in the juvenile justice system.

A striking instance of families assisting families came after Hurricane Katrina in Louisiana. Many families were forced to evacuate their homes without any idea of what had happened to their incarcerated children. Families and Friends of Louisiana’s Incarcerated Children went into action immediately. “In the days after the storm,” Bauer-Lubow recounted, “we were in shelters from southeast Louisiana all the way to Dallas, Texas. We were talking to hundreds of families. People were calling us at one in the morning because that was the only time they could get on the phone from the shelters. They didn’t know where their kids were. We were trying to connect kids to families. We made trips to drive kids to meet their families. We arranged for probation officers to drive to Florida and everywhere else to drop kids off... It was just this mad, chaotic period.”

Lobbying and Public Education

Community Connections for Youth provides “expert consultation for juvenile justice agencies on ways to reduce reliance on the juvenile justice system by strengthening partnerships with communities.” It also facilitates partnerships

between state juvenile justice systems and the broader community with the aim of supporting and diverting youth away from system involvement.

Essie Justice Group engages in public education around the special impact on women with incarcerated family members. According to Gina Clayton, “So far, our aim has been to get the existing criminal justice reform movement to acknowledge women as directly impacted, not just collaterally impacted.” To that end, Essie Justice Group has launched the “Stand With Her” campaign, which aims to achieve widespread public education by publicizing stories of women dealing with the incarceration of loved ones.

Lois DeMott and Citizens for Prison Reform work towards, among other goals, building bridges with the criminal justice system. Through engagement and education, Citizens for Prison Reform brings accountability to the Michigan Department of Corrections and integrate family members into that process. DeMott maintained that she has seen firsthand “the importance of not just doing policy work but really working to build a bridge in with the department.”

“Working to develop that relationship is not easy,” she acknowledged, “but I’ve found even the wardens are starting to gain respect.”

Policy work remains a key piece of their reform strategy. Citizens for Prison Reform holds Legislative Education Days where their members speak with legislators “about the importance of family visits during a prisoner’s incarceration and other issues and concerns.”

“We wanted it to include family responsibility” as well as family rights, said DeMott. “It was amazing. The first legislative day we [hosted] we had around 110 family members come. We had a huge turnout. The number of legislators who came was phenomenal. Several legislators said they’d been to events, but never felt this energy — the personal stories are what did that.” Citizens for Prison Reform has held similar events for several years in a row and is planning another.

During her tenure with Texas Families of Incarcerated Youth (TFIY), Tarsha Jackson contributed to efforts that led to the transfer of thousands of youth back to communities and to the closure of many of the state’s juvenile prisons. Jackson also helped successfully pass a Parent’s Bill of Rights. Resolved Jackson, “I continue to work at it. I feel it’s my responsibility to oversee the implementation of policy changes that were needed.”

Tracy McClard of FORJ-MO puts most of her effort into legislation rather than peer support or direct services. She feels this is the way to produce the broadest change. She checks off a list of strategies worthy of a seasoned lobbyist: “Making sure before we file a bill that [legislators] will make it a priority. Making sure you have close relationships with legislators and access when you need that. Making sure that when you communicate with them, they are there to answer back. That’s how we get things done.”

“Books not bars, jobs not jails, healthcare not handcuffs are

some of our campaigns,” explained Zachary Norris of the Ella Baker Center. The Ella Baker Center pursues these ends via organizing and campaign work, media work and membership building. Further, Norris elaborated, “Some of the campaign work we’re doing currently is helping to build justice teams across states which will be rapid responders to state violence in conjunction with other organizations across the country.”

SECTION V: NEEDS

*“Money, exposure, training, media, numbers
— that’s what we need.”*

— Michael McIntosh, Friends and Families of
Youth Incarcerated at Walnut Grove

One of the primary goals of our research was to determine the challenges and needs of the various organizations, as well as the larger family movement. Two threads that emerged with particular frequency were the need for support in communications (including storytelling, messaging, and social media) and increased capacity (including fundraising, among other areas of assistance).

Communications Support Storytelling

*“Stories have to come from families. It’s the
lynchpin to everything. We would never have
won juvenile justice reform had it not been
for families being able to tell their stories.”*

— Gina Womack, Families and Friends of
Louisiana’s Incarcerated Children

All of our Family Justice Leaders agreed that storytelling is critical. Most organizations have family leaders and affected youth telling their stories. Several expressed the need for greater capacity in order to recruit new storytellers and develop different ways to tell stories.

As Jeannette Bocanegra remarked, “There is no one to gather the stories, to collect them, to keep them up, to disseminate them, to edit them. There are so many ways we need visibility. Stories are one way because sharing stories softens the hearts

of everyone.”

Gina Clayton of Essie Justice Group pointed to the need to share what is learned at family gatherings with a wider audience. “Often convenings happen, magic happens,” reflected Clayton, “but there’s no way to share out. If there were story tellers at convenings who could capture and tell stories that are beautiful and authentic, what happens could get shared out in a real way. That can’t fall on the shoulders of those doing the work of the convening.”

Family leaders stressed the importance of combining personal stories with facts and data. Sue Badeau articulated up the sentiments of many when she reasoned, “The audience is going to be most moved to act when provided with a combination of stories that personalize, humanize, and give that inside view with real facts and solid, concrete information.” Other family leaders consistently affirmed that assistance in understanding how to combine data and research with stories effectively, as well as assistance with conducting necessary research, would be enormously helpful.

Additionally, although storytelling is crucial to inspiring change, several of those interviewed flagged concerns about the potential for re-traumatization, exploitation, and simple exhaustion among those who shared painful personal experiences.

Tracy McClard described her own experience of sharing her testimony as an important but increasingly difficult process. “At first, you feel you have to tell your story to anyone who’ll listen because these things need to change. It still feels that way, but it hurts more,” she said. Continuing to testify publicly, she rationalized, “means I can’t get past that point in our lives. It knocks me out for two or three days every time I do it. I finally realized that I can’t do it anymore.”

The inevitable burnout that McClard described underscores the need for resources that will enable family justice organizations to train and support new members in telling their stories effectively so the job does not fall only a small number of veteran leaders.

Sue Badeau emphasized that families and youth also need safe spaces to tell stories among themselves as a means of mutual support. This peer-to-peer testimony must be separate from storytelling in advocacy arenas.

Peer support can offer some protection against the risks and stresses of testifying publicly. In a process Badeau calls “Strategic Sharing,” families teach one another how to share only what needs to be shared, while preserving privacy and protecting against exploitation.

“We need training together with other families. We need to partner with other families in very real ways,” said Tracey Wells-Huggins. She conveyed that she appreciates opportunities to work with writers and others who offer new skill sets.

The need to tell one’s story can be complicated by a fear of retribution. “At first you have no control, so telling your story helps you get that out to people who do care and can help,”

Tracy McClard recalled. “But you’re also afraid... Your child is still there inside. You might have the fear that they might take it out on him or her, because retribution inside is really bad. If you still have loved one in custody, or on probation, it’s very scary to tell your story.”

If used strategically *before* a family member is sentenced, however, storytelling can be a powerful way of advocating on his or her behalf. Raj Jayadev of the Albert Cobarrubias Justice Project (ACJP) has found that family-centered storytelling — part of a larger process ACJP calls “participatory defense” — can have a significant effect on sentencing decisions.

The Albert Cobarrubias Justice Project helps families to produce a “social biography” in written or video format. “That absolutely is a tool we use to tangibly change whether someone is locked up,” Jayadev affirmed. “The system will give your loved one time served. If you engage, you can turn it into time saved.” To date, the organization has primarily trained public defenders’ offices in the model, which they encourage families to use in partnership with defense attorneys, but there is also strong potential for replication by family-led organizations.



Photo courtesy of the Albert Cobarrubias Justice Project.
Retrieved from www.acjusticeproject.org/category/police-misconduct.

Writing Training and Placement

“Communications is always changing. We constantly need training and retraining on how to write a good op-ed, how to do social media, and what’s coming next in technology. As a movement, we benefit from learning the basics of good communications and media skills.”

— Sue Badeau

Despite the obstacles noted above, most family activists felt they had become very successful in telling their stories to a variety of audiences. Where they need support, many stressed, is in producing written versions of their stories and in getting media attention that goes beyond hearings and headlines.

“We heard from other family members that many are experienced in verbally telling their stories and testifying,” relayed Texas Inmate Families Association’s Jennifer Erschabek, “but fewer are trained in writing for media, testimony, and advocacy.” DeMott and Bocanegra, among others, expressed a desire to learn to write and place op-ed-style commentaries that combine stories with data and research.

Some family members worried about misperception or negative media spin if stories are told without proper support. “The training for the families is the biggest thing,” said Michael McIntosh. “More practice telling the stories. When you get in front of the cameras, the media is going to paint you as the problem if you aren’t trained.”

More broadly, family activists expressed the need for professional support with all aspects of communications. “We need a communications person,” said Gina Clayton of the rapidly growing Essie Justice Group. “Right now we have two women working off personal laptops. We need a full-time person to do communications work for the organization, not just someone sending emails. In an advocacy organization, tackling stigma with a communication person is vital.”

“One of the biggest gaps in our capacity has been communications. It’s always at the top of the needs list,” agreed Grace Bauer-Lubow. “Our capacity now is being spent trying to answer the needs of these systems that are calling on our expertise, whereas we need capacity within this organization.”

“I also really need support to hire a marketing and communication group or a person who can give us strategic advice on communication strategy that is not just reactive but [can] really think about messages we produce,” related Clayton. “Being able to brand build for a new organization like ours is important for us and for the issue, because we’re trying to say things in a new and different way.”

Media Messaging

“If media and messaging training were offered to me today, I would immediately go through our network and give you 15 people who should be extensively interviewed and taught to interview, to create op-eds, commentaries, articles. We would love the help in getting those placed. Something like that would be incredibly valuable to us.”

— Grace Bauer-Lubow,
Justice for Families

One way to support family-led organizations in meeting their communications needs is to provide venues for them to share materials and best practices with one another. Several groups have developed tools that would be useful to others doing similar work.

Justice for Families, for example, produced a powerful, solutions-oriented report based on surveys and focus groups with more than a thousand family members of incarcerated youth.³⁰ The Albert Cobarrubias Justice Project has developed training on its participatory defense model, including how to produce social biographies.³¹ The Texas Inmate Families Association (TIFA) puts out brochures and newsletters that connect its 18 chapters across the state. Erschabek suggested this could be a model for other family organizations.

Erschabek was one of several to express a need for support on messaging specific to policy change. Family activists, she encouraged, could use help getting in touch with legislators and “learning how to talk about broader policies — like diverting the billions spent on prisons into the communities instead.”

Gina Clayton also underscored the importance of getting the media to look to family members not only for “stories of suffering” but also for the tremendous understanding of policy those with firsthand experience can bring to the debate. “We have so much more capacity as families to spark a more inclusive movement,” urged Clayton.



Photo courtesy of Dolores Canales.

Website and Social Media Assistance

“Yes! We need more storytelling help, more website help, more social media training. We especially need this to keep young people involved.”

**Jennifer Erschabek,
Texas Inmate Families Association**

Many groups stressed need for greater online presence and capacity, from building and maintaining an effective website to increasing public presence and awareness via social media. Some organizations’ websites are more developed than others, but across the board, those we spoke to sought to increase both their social media presence and technical skill.

Lois DeMott reasoned that having a good website can help with reaching families who do not have the resources to visit organizations’ offices to learn skills and receive peer support face-to-face.

“A really important thing for help is with the website,” said Jennifer Erschabek. “How do we keep it more vital, vibrant, useful, draw people to it? Reporters want family stories on there.”

Gina Womack asserted that she could benefit from a good public relations department, one that could create social media campaigns. “Social media is a job in and of itself. We need help with that.”

Increasing Capacity

“The idea that there could be some type of the hub...that could provide communication expertise and peer support to other groups – it would be incredible to do something like that. We simply don’t have the capacity to put together the communications it would take to do that, nor the team of people. It’s not that people don’t exist. It’s our capacity to be able to pull it together and coordinate it.”

**– Grace Bauer-Lubow,
Justice for Families**

“There is so much more to be done and so many more voices that want and need to be

included. When we see those voices included and uplifted, then we can say we’re in a family movement. Right now we are in an anti-incarceration movement that sometimes looks like families leading it.”

**– Gina Clayton,
Essie Justice Group**

Strengthening Outreach

Every family member we interviewed was vocal about needing to strengthen outreach in order to grow and become effective as a movement. The Family Justice Leaders expressed the desire to come together to learn about policy, how to lobby, and how to advocate as well as how better to support one another. They want outreach capability to bring more family members into the movement.

Tracey Wells-Huggins specifically suggested that she like to see “teams of impacted family members available for every youth that goes to court across the country.”

Jennifer Erschabek argued that more volunteers and more paid staff were crucial to expanding outreach. Michael McIntosh expressed the need for more national meetings in order to create a movement-building platform.

“It really helps if you can feel like you’re part of a bigger picture,” reaffirmed Tracy McClard. “When you get back to your own state to do own work by yourself again, you want to feel part of a national movement.”

“We need to evaluate what we’re doing. We need to know what is effective and what isn’t,” Grace Bauer-Lubow maintained. Having the resources to accomplish this crucial piece, she felt, is necessary for growth.

The leaders also expressed support for national gatherings of families. “You’ll hear that from every parent,” Tracy McClard informed us. “It gives you a sense of belonging ...just to get together to talk and share our own stuff. Doesn’t have to be a planned full program, but a convening would be very beneficial at an emotional level.”

Tracey Wells-Huggins added her voice in with those who see national gatherings as important to movement-building. She said they are useful for providing validation and support, as well as spaces to create collective strategies and messages.

Essie Justice Group recently held a convening for family leaders and supporters. “It’s important not just for us to come together but to have a designated space for funders to listen in and partner and provide resources on the ground,” analyzed Clayton. “Convenings are very resource- and time-intensive,” she added. More human and financial resources are needed for this critical piece of movement building and outreach.

Beyond building capacity and outreach, there is great desire to have more connection, more understanding of best practices, and more in-depth understanding of how these can all function to be greater than the sum of their parts.

Attracting Funding

“We would like to have resources to hire buses to bring families from Detroit — many don’t have cars or money for gas, so we are disproportionately middle class white families... We’ve talked about creating branches. We need a director to lead us. Gosh, we don’t even have a copy machine. Being able to go out and work on the county level is critical to reach families on the front lines. The amount of work we are trying to accomplish, we can’t keep up with it all. Maintaining our website, producing materials — right now I do that. It’s really too much. We could do so much with more resources.”

— Lois DeMott,
Citizens for Prison Reform

Every family leader referenced the urgent need for more funding. This is not distinct from the other needs, but intertwined. They need more staff and more capacity. Most organizations are spread too thin, but, at the same time, some have the capability to do much more if they had the resources. The family leaders said that additional resources would help to connect them to the broader movement.

The family justice leaders expressed the need for more staff, as well as the ability to compensate existing staff and volunteers. A particularly common desire was for funding to hire communications and media staff. “Don’t just give them

the opportunity to tell them their story. Help them with it. Compensate them for their time and train them,” encouraged Michael McIntosh.

Along with more funding, organization leaders expressed needs for in-kind donations or assistance. Dolores Canales said her biggest need was for a paid or volunteer campaign manager, donated office space, and a van. Indeed, the need for vans to take family members to and from visiting days and other appointments was commonly expressed.

Grace Bauer-Lubow of Justice for Families echoed others who expressed interest in fundraising assistance. The need for a part-time grant writer or development staffer was widely cited among many of the groups.

Finally, there is also great need for pro-bono legal representation or legal funds. Many families were ill-equipped to navigate a very complicated legal system and were either unable to afford good counsel or were offered counsel that did not end up acting in the best interest of their children.

“There’s not enough lawyers at all. And most families don’t have the money for a good attorney. And many families that do, there’s a lot of attorneys that scam the families and tell them, ‘I can get him out,’” said Canales. “And then they mortgage their homes, take out loans.” Canales noted some returning citizens have knowledge of the law and could make effective legal advocates and lawyers if they had funds for law school.

“Where do I begin?” says Tracey Wells-Huggins of Renewed Minds before listing the strategies she would employ if she had more resources: “Make it so that teams of impacted family members would be available for every youth that goes to court across the country. There would have to be...free access to family support groups. We want to learn about policy, lobbying training, to know the difference between lobbying and advocating and when to use which one.”

Tarsha Jackson summarized the totality of needs this way: “What do we need? Money, grant-writing assistance, learning to write and message for media, learning to use data, social media training, help with Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram.”



Photo courtesy of Justice for Families.
Retrieved from www.justice4families.org/about/our-team.

CONCLUSION

The family-led movement to transform juvenile justice has built up gradually over more than a decade, in coffee shops and Cracker Barrels, living rooms and library basements. Parents who began by fighting for their own kids now support and rally newcomers, passing on lessons in everything from how to navigate the prison commissary system to how to initiate a federal civil rights investigation.

The burden these family leaders carry is heavy. Even those who have been most successful at the political level continue to suffer personally when their own children remain caught up in the system, or struggle with re-entry. But there is an energy to this burgeoning movement that those involved say offers personal sustenance as well as reason for political optimism. There is a sense that the excesses of mass incarceration have brought about a crisis opportunity, allowing the voices of those most affected to be heard after years of stigma and exclusion.

The voices of family leaders — in particular, the politically astute, system-savvy, devastated, and hope-driven voices of mothers with children in youth prisons — offer an uncompromising view of the destruction incarceration wreaks not only on those behind bars but upon all those who love them.

These homegrown leaders are presenting an alternative to mass incarceration, one in which isolation from family and community — currently our default response to a wide range of actions, from teenage mischief to serious harm — is replaced by an understanding of the centrality of family and community connections in young people's development. Only once we understand the damage that incarceration wreaks on the developing mind can we begin to envision and create alternatives that foster family connections, rather than severing them.

At a moment when the juvenile justice system is under a level of scrutiny not seen since the 1980s, when tough-on-crime politicians began filling youth prisons across the country, the family-led movement against mass incarceration holds the potential not only to change outcomes for individual young people but to reframe the national debate over what promotes public safety.



Photo courtesy of the Ella Baker Center for Human Rights.
Retrieved from www.ellabakercenter.org/node/1022563.



Photo courtesy of Community Connections for Youth.
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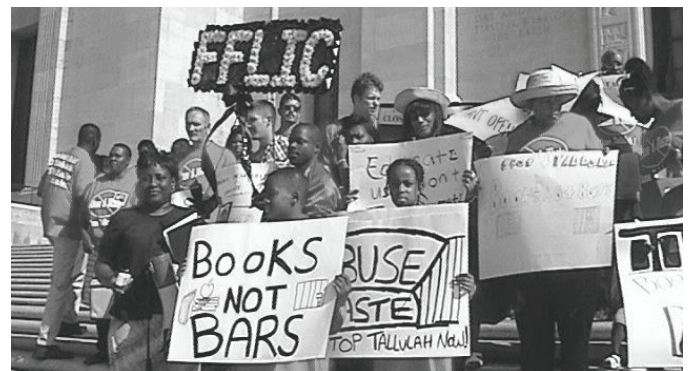


Photo courtesy of Families and Friends of Louisiana's Incarcerated Children.
Retrieved from www.fflic.org/resources/media/photo-galleries.

MAPPING THE PARTICIPATING FAMILY JUSTICE ORGANIZATIONS

When asked whether or not they felt connected to a national movement of family justice advocates, many of the family justice leaders we interviewed referenced the existence of a national movement in the scope of their activism, but not necessarily in the scope of their activist networks. Indeed, according to Raj Jayadev of the Albert Cobarrubias Justice Center, “I don’t know if I feel connected to a larger movement of families because I don’t really know them.” Similarly, Families and Friends of Louisiana’s Incarcerated Children’s Gina Womack emphasized that she had had “no idea” about other national advocacy efforts, but instead came to see how FFLIC’s advocacy “changed family dynamics not only in Louisiana but nationally,” becoming a part of a “groundswell that literally took the country.”

Jennifer Erschabek of Texas Inmates Families Association (TIFA) mentioned using her platform at TIFA to petition President Obama to sign federal “Ban the Box” legislation and to pass a similar ban against discrimination of ex-offenders in housing, both of which have national implications for improving the quality of life for those with criminal records. Despite being two of the more nationally connected family justice leaders, Tracy McClard and Tracey Wells-Huggins echoed the idea of their work with FORJ-MO and Renewed Minds, respectively, possessing a national scope. McClard indicated that she “definitely felt like a part of a national movement” having used “statistics from what other states have done to help move things here in Missouri”. Wells-Huggins responded that she was affiliated with a number of national organizations across different issue areas including the Black Lives Matter movement and JustLeadershipUSA.

We created a map of the family justice leaders’ organizations in order to bring to life this burgeoning but powerful national movement fighting on the behalf of incarcerated youth. Although some are more nationally connected than others, that there are national relationships at all speaks to the existing scope of the family justice leaders and their potential to form a cohesive national advocacy. Jayadev best summarized the promise of this movement, stating simply, “We’re hoping to become part of a national conversation.”



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