

**Coordinating Council on Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention**  
**Grace Warren**  
**Co-Director National Parent Caucus**  
**July 21, 2011**

***Overview:***

The Attorney General along with the directors of 12 other federal child serving agencies will be present or represented at this meeting. We have 10 minutes to put forth a summary of issues we have heard from families at the two focus groups, a short list of recommendations and to make clear why we believe these things are important.

The other panelists (who speak first) will likely have more to present as evidence of why family engagement should happen and where it is happening well in other systems. We do not have the documented evidence and therefore must make the case why it is necessary for families of juvenile justice involved children, *just as it is in the other child serving systems*. Our strength is in our passion and our evidence is our collective experience within the National Parent Caucus in the past 24 months.

***Presentation:***

Introduction by Lisa Lauxman

Audio recording of family voices (1 minute)

*As the audio plays, this is your chance to observe the audience for their reactions. Try to note who sympathizes and who turns away.*

The voices you have just heard are the voices of families that took part in focus groups with the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention. These families represent the voices of those that are voiceless and that have lived through today's juvenile justice system, a system that we are responsible for.

Good morning committee members and Attorney General Holder. I want to thank Robin Delany-Shabazz for the chance to address the Council this morning and the committee members for allowing me this opportunity. I especially would like to thank Mr. Attorney General Holder for taking the time to be here this morning. It is my understanding that this is an issue that you care deeply about and that you have spent time working with young people at the notorious Oakhill facility.

If your child is in trouble or having problems, who do you think should make the decisions about your child? Strangers or those who know that child best? I ask you to consider this: As the mother of a child once involved in the juvenile justice system, it is I and the hundreds of thousands of others like me who are the last to be invited to participate in this decision making body that has the authority to change the lives of children, day in and day out, in every community in this country. For the sake of those

children, I appeal to the Council to address this inadequacy and appoint a family member to the Council.

The audio you just heard is filled with anguish, confusion and frustration and is indicative of what we would hear throughout the focus groups with the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention. In the three focus groups conducted, two formal and one informal, we heard from families from 11 states around the country. Despite their distance from each other, diversity in backgrounds and economic status there were many common threads among their experiences. Today, we mention the top five:

- 1.) Insufficient or no information provided to families about court, detention, probation or adjudication processes
- 2.) Absence of family and care giver input into the services, placement and overall treatment of their children.
- 3.) Accessibility to prevention and intervention services in a time effective manner
- 4.) Lack of communication about the treatment, care and well-being of their child
- 5.) Lack of communication with their child

As families, we realized that our voices and those of our children were under-represented and in some cases misrepresented, at the federal level. We took on the task of bringing those voices to the decision makers in an effort to change what is clearly not working for too many families and their children.

Beginning in July of 2009, through a project of the Campaign for Youth Justice, which would become the National Parent Caucus, we began to develop a network to engage families. Today through calls, trainings, individual advocacy and peer-to-peer support, the National Parent Caucus serves nearly 400 families in 39 states. The peer-to-peer network is based on a model that families learned from the mental health and special education systems. Families who have children involved in the mental health and special education systems have a peer-to-peer network of support, many of the same families have no formal support within the juvenile justice systems. This is particularly troubling considering the long term consequences of a child's involvement in the justice system.

In the juvenile justice system families are often ignored and blamed for their children's involvement in the system, rather than given the supports and information necessary to make the best decisions for their children. By pointing fingers, systems alienate the very group with the most influence in the life of a child, their family. Many system stakeholders in the juvenile justice field openly acknowledge that their systems have become "a dumping ground" for children with educational, medical and mental health issues. This system is least prepared to provide the supports and services necessary for children in need and often aggravate pre-existing mental health issues as well as adding the stress of being locked in a cage and separated from family.

Through the last 24 months of work within the National Parent Caucus we have witnessed the strengthening of the families, the education of their communities and

ultimately families empowered to not only advocate for their own children but also for better outcomes for the many more that continue to filter into the system. Many families involved in the juvenile justice arena are already involved in the education, mental health, health care and other systems of care yet their specific needs and challenges go unmet, leading to more children in secure or non-secure care for longer periods of time than necessary or affordable to a country in an economic crisis. In light of our understanding of where obstacles and problems occur for families, we offer the following recommendations:

- 1.) As in mental health and special education systems, families involved in the juvenile justice system need a peer-to-peer network. This network could serve as the hub of information, available resources and educational materials on a variety of issues affecting children who are system involved. While a website may be able to put some information in the hands of families, there is no substitute for the one-on-one care that can be provided by those that have already experienced the same or similar situation or be able to view it from the perspective of a parent or family member.
- 2.) Our work also involved families of children who are held in adult jails and prisons, yet no matter where they end up in the system, the most common starting point is right in the middle of nearly every community in this country, the school. Schools should take advantage of this opportunity to become the source of information and resources to keep children from becoming further entangled in the juvenile justice system. Providing the space, a welcoming environment and help accessing services at the starting point rather than at the back end when cost begin to soar astronomically, schools could serve as a timely and effective intervention.

Having a peer-to-peer network at this starting point could provide prevention, intervention and a knowledgeable mentor to guide families to services that are cost effective and lead them away from more costly and less effective secure care or out of home placements that carry many unintended side effects and often add to the problems of the child rather than helping.

- 3.) Interagency boards that exist to prevent out of home placement could be utilized, without additional costs, to aid families of justice system involved children earlier. Providing families with a family advocate with knowledge of the juvenile justice system could enhance the interagency process by empowering families with parent-to-parent support and information that agency professionals may not realize the importance of. Having the collaboration of agencies involved sooner could prevent suspensions and expulsions that tend to alienate children from their school community and add to the rise in drop out rates.
- 4.) As directors of many child serving agencies, a more intense focus on the children that are involved in the justice system, would enable children to have the protections and services that are provided to all children. For instance, a child

with a disability, serving time in a secure care facility should have the same protections of IDEA, quality medical care and nutritional benefits as a child living in his community. By choosing to deliberately take a closer look at this particular group of children, from various perspectives within federal agencies, would certainly strengthen these children in multiple foundational needs.

In closing, I would like to offer the expertise of the National Parent Caucus and its many members, to aid the Council in family engagement at the federal level across all child serving agencies. I would also like to ask the Attorney General to hold your own listening session with families of system involved children. The voices you heard today deserve to be heard in their entirety. These children need us to act on their behalf and provide for their family's voices to be heard in this decision making body.

Thank you all for your time, attention and efforts on behalf of our children.