

CAMPAIGN FOR
YOUTH JUSTICE

BECAUSE THE CONSEQUENCES AREN'T MINOR

GET ORGANIZED

A Monthly Column by Grace Bauer – April 2010

Families in Crisis

Grace Bauer

I don't get to talk to families on their best days. Rather, I mostly talk to people when they are in the midst of crisis - a crisis having arisen because their child has been arrested or is somewhere on the short road to being tried, sentenced, or incarcerated as an adult even though they are still a child. I feel inadequate and find myself lacking answers. I feel scared for them knowing that they are powerless and the full range of consequences of these practices will not reach them until years down the road. Truly, it is the families and the children that will carry years of devastating burdens far longer than I.

As an organizer, I want to see the reform that will end these harmful practices, but as a family organizer, I want to provide answers to folks who have a right to understand every aspect of what is happening to their children in these circumstances. I keep wondering whose job it is to give families the information they need during this difficult time.

Many families seek legal advice from the attorneys that represent their children. Providing this advice, however, can be difficult for the attorneys because they represent the child, not the family. While families can and should take an active role in the defense of their child and communicate relevant information to the attorney, such as if the child has been in trouble before or was a good student, this still ultimately means that the care and concern of the child falls back to the family. Yet, the family often lacks the information necessary to help make decisions in the best interest of their child. How are families to make decisions without adequate information?

Many families turn to youth advocates, for information and help in times of crisis. It seems like these people, the ones that have mission statements that include phrases like "ensure the well-being of youth and families" or advocate for "developmentally appropriate treatment of juveniles in the justice system to ensure better results for kids and families," would know how to help a family. Yet, as the mother of a child once involved in the juvenile justice system and the adult criminal justice system, I discovered that "advocacy" actually referred to "policy advocacy" and in no way helped my child on the day he was beaten inside a juvenile facility.

Where else can families turn for real help and information in times of crisis? Perhaps agencies that talk of a world where children and families live in safe, nurturing communities

that provide for their needs, recognize their strengths and support their success can answer the questions of these families. It certainly seems reasonable to assume this potential to help when you read "provide for their needs," but again when a family turns to an agency like this for answers they find little in the way of information and even less in the way of support.

As a member of an organization working to support and empower families, I answer the questions of families to the best of my ability. Yet, even I am limited in what I can do to provide true help to families in crisis. What happens when I don't have legal answers, access to legal services in states across the country where families call from, contacts inside the local and state based systems where their children are involved in the justice system, or access to sources of support that can provide face to face contact and involvement? While we piece together fragile systems of support and do the best we can to meet the needs of families in times of great trial and life changing decisions, this still is not good enough. The lack of true support and information is unacceptable and an answer that most of us would not want if we were in similar situations with one of our own children.

So, who is responsible? Who has the power to bring families out of this lack of information and concern and into a world of true support? We do. As a society we make choices about who to elect to represent us and how we wish to deal with issues of poverty, drug use, and the other social problems we face. These decisions trickle down into who spends our tax dollars, what the dollars are spent on, and what services are ultimately available through these monies. Tragically, our decisions have served to make us the incarceration leader in the world. We must face the realities of these choices and be accountable to the millions affected by our justice system, especially our children and families.