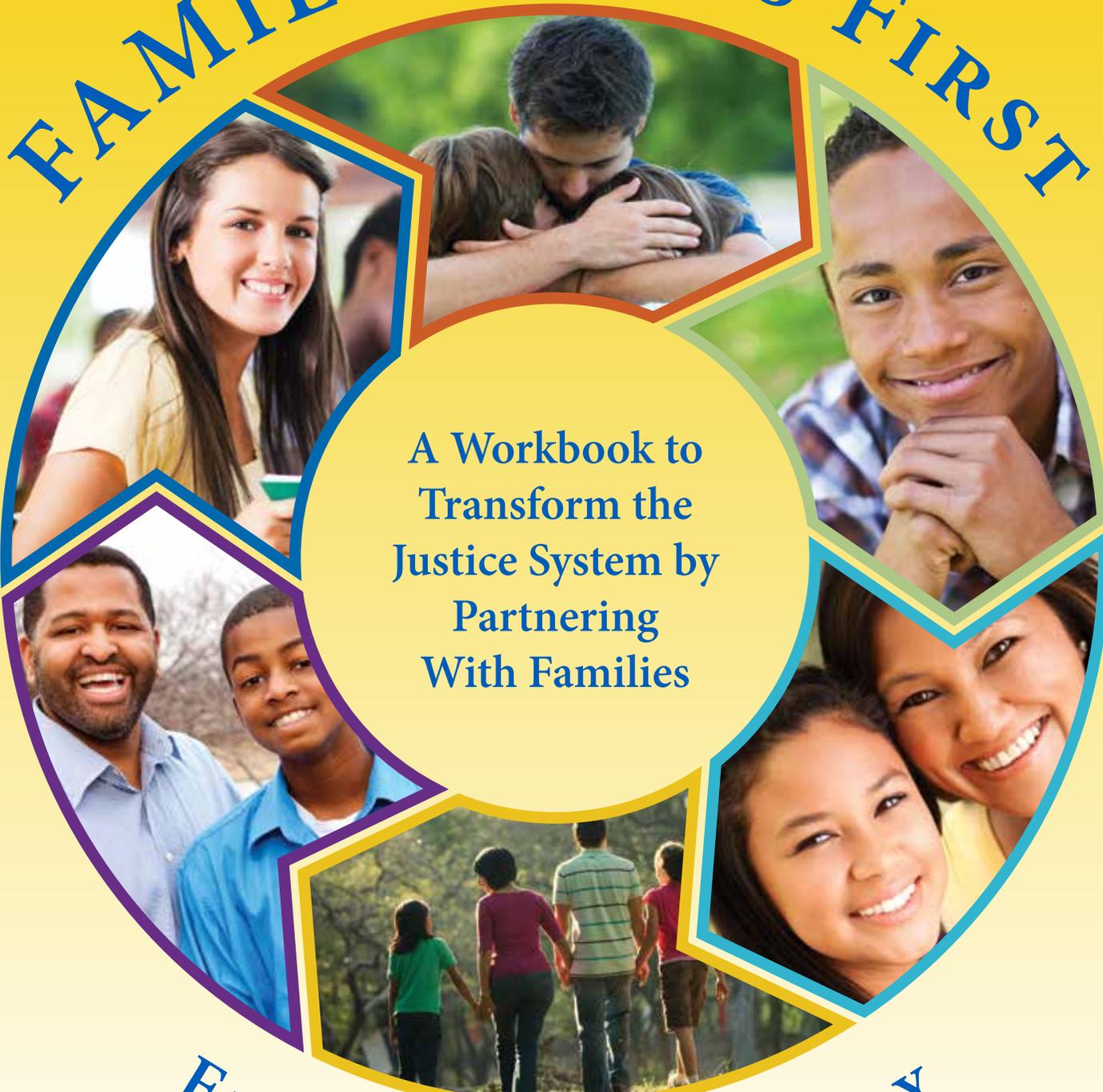


# FAMILY COMES FIRST



A Workbook to  
Transform the  
Justice System by  
Partnering  
With Families

# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

CAMPAIGN FOR  
**YOUTH JUSTICE**

BECAUSE THE CONSEQUENCES AREN'T MINOR



ALLIANCE FOR  
YOUTH JUSTICE

In Partnership with the Campaign for Youth Justice

# FAMILY COMES FIRST: EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

## OVERVIEW

*FAMILY Comes First* is a comprehensive analysis of current family engagement and family partnership practices in juvenile justice systems around the country. It provides needed tools and resources to practitioners to develop strong system-family partnerships in the juvenile justice system. Given the history of the juvenile justice system, which has historically kept families at arm's length, coupled with organizational and fiscal challenges facing agencies today, it is not surprising that many justice systems are struggling to meet the needs of families. While each of the individual efforts made by current juvenile justice systems and groups make important contributions to the field, what has been missing is a vision of what a transformed justice system looks like when that vision honors and supports families before and after their children have contact with the system.

A paradigm shift is underway in juvenile justice – one that recognizes that families are the most knowledgeable experts in their children's lives. System stakeholders are working together with families to break down stereotypes and stigma, engage families in individual treatment decisions and larger policy reforms, and prepare youth for productive futures. In the past few years, the juvenile justice field has made major strides in elevating the importance of family involvement to overall system reform efforts. We have come a long way even though we have far to go.

*FAMILY Comes First* fills that gap by providing a clear and intentional guide to transforming the justice system by taking a family-driven approach.

## RESEARCH

Through a literature review, focus groups of a variety of stakeholders, surveys of system professionals, and site visits throughout the country, this workbook identifies the common ground that exists between family members and system professionals, and it provides a road map forward to making family-system partnerships a reality.

Between March and July 2011, we convened a series of four listening sessions in partnership with the federal Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention (OJJDP) and the Education Development Center. Families and youth from 16 states and tribes who had direct experiences with the justice system participated in focus groups.

## FINDINGS

*FAMILY Comes First* analyzes what families, professionals, and our research identified as **Five Features of a Transformed Justice System**:

1. Families will be supported before and after challenges arise.
2. Families will have access to peer support from the moment a youth is arrested through exit from the system.
3. Families will be involved in decision-making processes at the individual, program, and system levels to hold youth accountable and keep the public safe.
4. Families will be strengthened through culturally competent treatment options and approaches.
5. Families will know their children are prepared for a successful future.

In addition, this workbook provides a new framework for systems—the **FAMILY Model**—to guide efforts to create and sustain meaningful family-system partnerships. Readers can think of the Five Features as slices in a pie that together achieve a transformed justice system, with the FAMILY Model providing the essential ingredients to achieve this vision.



## KEY PARTS OF FAMILY COMES FIRST

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- In **Part I** we review the research on why families need to be integral partners in addressing youth needs as well as the common misconceptions that exist about families. We report the major problems that family members and system stakeholders face when interacting with each other. We also summarize the benefits that systems have already achieved by becoming more family-friendly, and believe readers will see that families and systems working together is best for children and public safety.
- In **Part II** we describe the “Five Features of a Transformed Justice System” by highlighting promising ideas used in communities across the country at different stages of the justice system. The examples are offered to showcase the breadth and scope of what families say they want for their children and our justice system. This section shows readers that change is possible and that family members can work alongside system professionals to meet the needs of youth.
- **Part III** compiles the lessons learned from across the country about how systems have been able to achieve positive results to date. Using the word “family” as a mnemonic device, we present the FAMILY Model as an integrated conceptual framework for system stakeholders to use to evaluate how responsive the justice system and other child-serving agencies are at meeting the needs of youth and families. We also provide concrete policy recommendations to help federal, state, and local policymakers take an affirmative family-focused approach to transform the current justice system.
- In **Part IV**, we provide three concrete tools to help the reader get started making changes to practice and policy in their own jurisdiction. Tool 1 is our quick start guide that helps explain how transformation efforts happen and helps readers identify things they can do to initiate action in their agency or community. Tool 2 is a sample focus group script to use to solicit feedback of family members. Tool 3 is a comprehensive assessment for system professionals to evaluate how well their system complies with the elements of the FAMILY Model.

## Recommendations for Federal and State Policymakers and Stakeholders

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- 1 Each agency and program having contact with children and families involved in the justice system should hire or appoint a staff person, preferably a family member or former system-involved youth, to coordinate family engagement efforts and activities.
- 2 Every justice system agency and program should conduct the comprehensive assessment (Tool 3) included in this workbook and develop specific strategies to implement the FAMILY Model.
- 3 A National Technical Assistance Center on Family Engagement should be created to provide support to state and local justice and child-serving agencies interested in starting or expanding family engagement programs.
- 4 Each agency having responsibility for children and youth should identify existing family support organizations and initiatives that can be tapped or expanded to provide support to families involved in the justice system.
- 5 Collectively, the child-serving and justice system agencies should examine state fiscal policies that incentivize incarceration and residential placement of youth over community-based options. States should develop fiscal strategies to fund prevention, diversion, and family and community-based programs that will respond to youth and family needs such as the programs profiled in this workbook.
- 6 State justice agencies and court systems should help develop a basic guide to the justice system for families that can be tailored or expanded for use by local jurisdictions.
- 7 The federal government should fund new research initiatives to begin to expand upon the existing evidence base for family engagement programs.

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*The Campaign for Youth Justice (CFYJ) is dedicated to ending the practice of trying, sentencing, and incarcerating youth under 18 in the adult criminal justice system.*

*This workbook was funded in large part by a generous grant from the Annie E. Casey Foundation.*

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