

GET ORGANIZED

Organizing Ourselves: Cooperation is the Key to Success

By Grace Bauer

Grace Bauer, a field organizer, joined the Campaign for Youth Justice in 2008. She has worked to unite the parents and allies of children to change laws and practices that result in children being prosecuted and confined as adults.

 grace

Organizing To Do More

I am always talking to all of you about organizing others, but I would like to talk about organizing ourselves, as the families of friends of youth in the justice system, a little differently and hopefully better.

As many of you may know, the first week of April, the Campaign took on the task of getting 500 signatures for a set of regulations for the Prisoner Rape Elimination Act, PREA for short. I am happy to report that we did get over 1300 hundred signatures and that should have the effect that we had hoped for, which was to show there was broad support for these recommendations from individuals and organizations across the country.

I would like to thank everyone who signed on and helped us spread the message far and wide. It was quite the feat to get what we did with so little time to work with. We were successful, and we should be proud of what we accomplished. Yet, there is never a time when we can rest on what we did last week and to add to that, we must always be asking ourselves the question, "How can we do more?" In hindsight, we could have done more. The "more" is what I want to talk to you about today.

We are at a moment in time where we have both evidence and economic factors on our side. States are floundering under huge debt and state governments are looking for a way to cut budgets that doesn't threaten to tick off the people that put them in office. Corrections budgets are now or will be soon on the potential chopping block. I feel strongly that this is our chance to pass sweeping legislation in every state to do away with prison beds.

This brings me to another problem we have amongst ourselves that we must rectify if we are going to do anything of value. We can't do this alone! We must start looking for our allies in every state. The PREA signatures can give us ideas of where to start, but the key word here is "Start!" We must expand our numbers!

Any time I have ever started a new organizing project, the first course of business is getting a list of people and their contact information. These are the people that are likely going to believe many of the same things that we do. Every state has at least a few advocacy groups working on prison reform, immigrant rights, death penalty, juvenile life without parole, mandatory minimums, mental health, disability rights, special education, human rights and civil rights. Each of these groups and the individuals that make them up are working hard on their issue. Sadly though we are all working apart from one another and missing the opportunity to band together and demand larger changes than what any of us have envisioned so far.

Miss Assata was one of the members of FFLIC that served as a mentor to the younger, less experienced parents. Her lesson to us was, "It's not about going to the Capitol, it's about how many you have with you when you get there." Sage advice for all of us. I know that many of you have been working on pieces of legislation this year: all good bills that would bring positive change. Yet for every good bill we bring, another few bad bills will go through in your states because many of you don't have the capacity to work on good bills and monitor and stop bad ones. We take one step forward if we win, but, in working alone, we also take several steps back each year. We can't achieve the change we need in the juvenile and adult criminal justice system at this pace.

If each of us in our home states could begin to gather with other families and the organizations working on the issues I mentioned above, we could become larger in mass and stronger in resources to achieve serious change. We would also be much better prepared to handle and use opportunities like the PREA recommendations when they happen. I know some of you are going to ask, "Why would these other groups care about this?" All of these other groups are working on human rights issues, just as we are. It is on each of us to step into what I consider a void in leadership on this and encourage others to see themselves as part of the human rights framework. All of the issues would be better served by banding together to show more strength.

What does this look like on the ground? You can start by simply looking around for who these other groups are. Check the sign-on list of PREA signatures and see if any of the organizations on the list are in your state or if they have an affiliate in your state. Secondly, look online by simply googling some of the above mentioned issues along with your state or city name. When you find them, find out if they have public meetings and go. This is one of the best ways to network. Have a notebook with you to get their contact information. Tell others what you are working on and keep in mind you are working from the human rights framework so any group defending human rights are likely allies. They may not realize this yet, but you will have your chance to educate them. Most groups will likely not take on your issue by putting their slim resources into it, but many will be happy to support your issue by allowing you space to talk about it and sharing your message through their Listservs and other contacts.

I also would like to talk about how this could have dramatically changed the number of signatures we were able to obtain for the PREA recommendations. If every member of the National Parent Caucus had a list of 50 like-minded people in their state they could have sent the request to with a little personal note, we could have had over 13,000 signatures in the same amount of time. Note the mention of a personal note here. The best work in this business comes through personal relationships. I could have sent this to a thousand people who don't know me, and I would have been very lucky to get back 100 signatures. Yet, if the person receives it with a little note that says, "Hi there Gina, how are you?" "Listen this request is about stopping the rape and sexual assault of kids across this country and as you know Corey is in jail right now and this is a constant worry for me." "It only takes a minute to hit reply and add your name to the list." Because Gina knows Corey and me and it only takes a minute, I am very likely to get her signature.

Another good idea is to be a part of other group's Listservs. For those of you who are not able to go out and find others, spend a little time online trying to find like-minded groups and join their Listservs. If every one of us were a part of a Listserv or two and got the message out that way, we could have gotten well over 20,000 signatures. I will be brief on this last point, but I would be leaving out an important tool if I failed to mention the social media that most of us are using today. The average person on Facebook has 130 friends, and if you got 100 of those to sign and shared it with 100 of their friends, we could have obtained hundreds of thousands of signatures. Tunisia and Egypt are fine examples of just how powerful these tools can be when we understand how they can be used as social change agents.

As you can see, with just a small amount of effort we can expand our reach and build our capacity to take action. Would you like to talk about how you can do this in your state? Give us a call at the Campaign and let us help!

