

**Principles of Effective Juvenile Justice Coalitions**  
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by  
**Robert M. Francis**

Effective community based and statewide coalitions focused on juvenile justice system reform can be a powerfully effective way of initiating and sustaining major system reforms. In Connecticut we have been particularly successful in developing and expanding such coalitions.

The purpose of this paper is twofold: (1) to describe a local juvenile justice reform coalition that sparked, built and fostered a formal statewide juvenile justice system reform organization and (2) to describe the principles of coalition building that were instrumental in the development of these efforts.

Over the past ten years, changes in the juvenile justice system have been dramatic in Bridgeport and throughout the state of Connecticut, much of which can be credited to effective coalition building efforts. The principles of effective coalition building as practiced in Bridgeport and throughout Connecticut have been borrowed liberally from the Asset Based Community Development Institute at Northwestern University, the Drug Free Communities Coalition work of the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration and the early work of the Regional Youth Adult Social Action Partnership in greater Bridgeport, Connecticut.

**1. Case Study: Seeds of Reform in the Greater Bridgeport Juvenile Justice Task Force**

In 2001, in response to the deplorable conditions of the Bridgeport Juvenile Detention Center and Courthouse, the Regional Youth Adult Social Action Partnership [RYASAP] convened a juvenile court judge, several local and state child advocates and juvenile justice system professionals and formed the Greater Bridgeport Juvenile Justice Task Force. The Task Force, still meeting monthly, now consists of representatives from Juvenile Probation, Juvenile Detention, Juvenile Parole, Juvenile Court Judges, Juvenile Defender's Office, area behavioral health treatment providers, boards of education, youth serving providers, state child advocates, health care professionals and parent advocates.

The mission of the Task Force is to assess the condition of the juvenile justice system in greater Bridgeport; raise awareness about young people being served by the juvenile court as well as youth at risk of entering the juvenile justice system; examine current conditions of the court, detention and treatment facilities utilized by the court; advocate to improve the system; and raise resources for additional supports and services for these youth.

Early in its history the Task Force made an assumption that the majority of young people in detention or on probation would be better served outside of the juvenile justice system. It

obtained a grant from the Tow Foundation to study who the young people were who were in detention or on probation. The findings showed that 60 percent of those in the juvenile detention center were there for either status offenses or very low level crimes. Fewer than 20 percent were detained for serious juvenile offenses. Similarly, 85 percent of the young people on probation were for status offenses, drug possession and other low level offenses. The study also discovered that a disproportionate number of young people in detention or on probation were young people of color.

It was determined that the Task Force would focus its attention on broader system reform and try to obtain needed supports and services to either divert young people away from the juvenile justice system or ensure that young people who were part of the system received the services and supports necessary to be effectively reintegrated back into the community.

Since the study 8 years ago, the Task Force has led and facilitated a high level of collaborative successes:

- An information list of over 140 persons and a monthly gathering of over 40 professionals and advocates in Greater Bridgeport to discuss and work on juvenile justice reform issues.
- Successful advocacy for a new juvenile courthouse and detention center, both completed and opened in 2008.
- Two grants from the Tow Foundation: (1) in 2002, to study the profiles of young people in juvenile probation and detention and (2) in 2005, to study arrest records of juveniles in the Bridgeport, Stratford and Trumbull police departments to determine the degree and causes of overrepresentation of young people of color in the juvenile justice system (Disproportionate Minority Contact DMC).
- Successful advocacy for new services in greater Bridgeport to keep young people out of the juvenile justice system or to better serve them within the system, including a Family Support Center for high need chronic status offenders; STEP program to facilitate successful reentry to the public schools after residential or secure placement; Bridgeport and Stratford Juvenile Review Boards to divert low-level offenders away from the juvenile court and reduce DMC; Juvenile Resource Center; mentoring programs; re-entry programs; increased behavioral health services; new services to reduce expulsions and out of school suspensions in the public schools; and in partnership with the Center for Children's Advocacy, a new teen legal clinic in Fairfield County.
- In 2009 the Greater Bridgeport Juvenile Justice Task Force was used as a model by the Connecticut Judicial Branch and the Connecticut Department of Children and Families to establish Local Implementation Service Teams [LIST] in all 13 juvenile court districts in Connecticut. This change by the two state agencies responsible for juvenile justice service implementation, seeks to establish an integrated system for planning, implementation and evaluation of juvenile justice service delivery. The LIST's provide a venue for both (1) community level interagency coordination and (2) formal

communication and planning between state agencies and local communities around juvenile justice issues.

- Successful advocacy for passage of comprehensive runaway and homeless youth legislation in Connecticut.

## **2. Case Study: Local to State Reform, Formation of the Connecticut Juvenile Justice Alliance**

Soon after the Tow Foundation supported research studies were conducted by the Greater Bridgeport Juvenile Justice Task Force, it was discovered that many of the problems found with the Bridgeport area's juvenile justice system were, in fact, endemic throughout Connecticut. In 2002, leadership from the Bridgeport Task Force along with leadership from major statewide advocacy organizations including the Center for Children's Advocacy, Connecticut Voices for Children, The Connecticut Child Advocates Office and The Tow Foundation convened to discuss the possibility of creating a statewide juvenile justice system reform advocacy organization. While each of the organizations were keenly aware of the need for, and were interested in major juvenile justice system reform, none had the specific resources or mandate to do it.

The Tow Foundation awarded a \$50,000 seed grant to RYASAP and helped secure additional assistance from the JEHT Foundation to develop a strategic plan and hire staff to form the Connecticut Juvenile Justice Alliance (CTJJA). Additional funders later included the Campaign for Youth Justice, Public Welfare Foundation, Open Society Institute, Connecticut Health Foundation, Fairfield County Community Foundation, Community Foundation of Greater New Haven, E. S. Moore Foundation and the ROCKIT Fund.

Since its inception, the Alliance has led and facilitated major success throughout Connecticut's juvenile justice system including:

- Establishment of a Connecticut Juvenile Justice Alliance [CTJJA], a sustainable organization seen as "the source" for juvenile justice information and advocacy in Connecticut.
- Increased awareness and appreciation among policy makers, state agency leaders and practitioners of the need to invest in early intervention, diversion and community-based solutions.
- In partnership with the Campaign for Youth Justice led a successful advocacy effort to enact legislation to raise the age of jurisdiction in Connecticut from 16 to 17 years old in 2010 and to 18 in 2012.
- Steady and significant improvement to the support system for status offenders, "Families With Service Needs" (FWSN) including: (A) Elimination of the Valid Court Order exception that resulted in many status offenders inappropriately spending time locked in a juvenile detention center; and (B) Establishment of a statewide network of Family Support Centers, which have proven to successfully address the needs of particularly high-risk FWSN young people and their families.

- In partnership with the State Juvenile Justice Advisory Committee, established a communications campaign being implemented to raise awareness of Disproportionate Minority Contact (DMC) and statewide research results.
- Advocate for major improvements in conditions in the state training school for boys.
- Established a Statewide Education Work Group, bringing together a diverse partnership including the State Department of Education, advocacy groups, researchers and legal aid organizations, to discuss needed reforms and collaborate toward their accomplishment. Education legislation was passed to: (A) Eliminate the abuse of out of school suspensions, (B) End the practice of expelling youth from school following commitment to the Department for Children and Families for the same offense for which they were already punished and (C) Require school districts to report truancy data.

CTJJA has become a valuable and respected advocate and partner for children by the Connecticut Judicial Branch and the State of Connecticut.

### **3. Cross-Cutting Principles of Effective Coalition Building**

Much has been written about the formation of coalitions to address social issues especially in the substance abuse and mental health fields. Much less has been written about how they can be utilized to build statewide and national efforts for system reform in juvenile justice. There are several characteristics of the work that was accomplished in Bridgeport and in Connecticut that may be instructive to others attempting to use community coalitions as a way to focus on juvenile justice system reform.

**Issues with Broad Appeal:** There needs to be consensus to change the conditions that led to working on the issue that was selected. If your goal is to reform the juvenile justice system, there are plenty of places to start – conditions in detention, DMC, school to prison pipeline issues, conditions in state training schools, transfer laws, inadequate mental health or substance abuse services, lack of girls’ services, etc. Coalitions can address all of these issues eventually but it is important to start with issues that will gain broad-based support and provide traction for early short-term successes. In Bridgeport, conditions in juvenile detention and the juvenile courthouse were the initial focus. Statewide, once CTJJA was formed, the state training school for boys and raising the age of jurisdiction were top priorities.

**Short Term Successes [Low Hanging Fruit]:** Try not to select the most difficult condition to change right off the bat! But if you do, figure out that you need to address that issue in bite sized chunks. Nothing frustrates a group quicker than failing at trying to change the world. Where is the low hanging fruit? Who can we bring together who normally do not talk to one another? Can we build collaboration by working together on a new grant to solve a small part of our larger problem? What other connections can we make in the group to solve each other’s issues in addressing this problem? Major systems reform changes usually come from many small victories!

**Sustained Action Research Focus:** Any action taken should be based on reliable and accurate data. Get the facts straight before you start making a lot of noise. Find out who the young people are in your systems including demographics, types of offenses, history, geography, dispositions, etc. ; find out what conditions led to their entry into the juvenile justice system; obtain school records; and obtain comparison data from other similar districts to see if your data is out of line with other places. Comparison data is often used to make a strong case for change. For example, in Connecticut it was discovered that more young people under the age of 18 were placed in secure confinement than any state in the nation. In addition, long term adolescent brain research by Dr. Abigail Baird, Director of the Laboratory for Adolescent studies at Vassar College was highly effective in convincing state legislators to no longer treat adolescents as adults.

**Collect Individual Stories and Communicate Them:** It is important to attach stories to the data. Every statistic should involve a story of a real life young person who has had that experience. Legislators and policy makers don't react well to horrible data in a vacuum. They like to talk to young people who have had these experiences. Short videos of interviews with young people of all races and cultures and their guardians made for effective advocacy messages in Bridgeport and in Connecticut.

**Leader Must Be Well-Respected and Perceived as Neutral:** Most coalitions fall apart because they don't get the leadership right! Conveners or facilitators are often self-selected because they are the most passionate person involved with an issue. However, this does not necessarily make them an effective leader. First, the leader should be well-respected by the many different factions involved in the issue. Second, they need a broad vision with the capacity to see the many sides of an issue. The leader can have opinions about an issue but they should have the capacity to hear all sides before determining a direction. Third, the need to develop a vision of where the system needs to be and realistically can be in the long term. Fourth, the leader must be tenacious as well as patient. System-wide solutions are inevitably complex and require perseverance over many years. Finally, it is worth noting that the leader and facilitator is not necessarily the same person. Good facilitators seek everyone's opinions and are able to weigh conflicting viewpoints. The facilitator's job is to move the group from fact finding to decision making to action. Good facilitators are also cheerleaders congratulating members for their successes, recognizing new important work done by the members, and keeping the group optimistic and focused when things aren't going well.

**Grassroots and Grasstops Participation:** Effective coalitions need the people most affected by the negative conditions of the system – youth, parents, residents, advocates, natural helpers and people who live in the community, i.e., the “grassroots community.” However, they also need the community leaders and the people who control the systems – judges, prosecutors, defenders, probation and detention staff, law enforcement, service providers, advocacy organizations, and funders, namely the “grasstops community.” Effective coalition building is successful when the interests of the grassroots community are seen as similar to the grasstops

community and the two work together for system change. In Bridgeport and in Connecticut parent advocacy and youth groups work hand in hand with professionals and policy makers to effect major legislative and program changes.

**Focus on Gifts and Talents:** Each member of a coalition has special gifts, talents and connections. These include special knowledge about the issue, either personal or professional, special skills that will help the group gain credibility and expertise to effectively advocate for change and people who know people who can gain access to decision makers who can make a difference. It is critical that the coalition recognize each person and organization for their special gifts, talents and connections and utilize their assets to forward the shared agenda.

**Capacity Building Emphasis:** Coalition members who make commitments for long term participation are always getting something for themselves in the exchange. Capacity building or professional and personal development as well as sharing new information are critical elements that enhance participant's growth as well as forwarding the goals of the coalition. Included in capacity building can be the sharing of the most recent research on an issue or training in restorative justice, new therapeutic techniques in dealing with juvenile justice youth or introducing members to best practices.

**Collaborative and Cooperative Orientation:** The point of many different factions working together cannot be overstated. If the goal is to create the best possible conditions for young people and assure that they will be treated in the least restrictive environment relative to their behavior, it is essential to get everyone working toward the same goals. This is not easy work since most institutions are resistant to change, but it is always possible to find friendly advocates in high places even within institutions. Inside and outside advocates working cooperatively is essential for meaningful change. In Bridgeport and in Connecticut the heads of the regional Juvenile Probation, Detention, Juvenile Defenders and Child Welfare offices all became advocates for local change and additional resources. Most of the major class action lawsuits to reform the child welfare and juvenile justice systems statewide were exercised by local advocates uniting with state officials.

**Diversified Funding for Sustainability:** Local coalitions don't always need money. They need the commitment of the professionals and advocates in the community and the shared resources of the people around the table. Statewide coalitions on the other hand, need more support to lobby on behalf of legislation, research issues, meet with policy makers and decision makers, inform the public about what is happening, implement communication strategies, and conduct educational forums and conferences. For this they need sustainable funding, which cannot come from a single source. Funding must be diverse to ensure that the coalition does not fail if a single source fails. The Bridgeport Task Force operates on small research grants and volunteer staff from RYASAP and the Task Force members. The Connecticut Juvenile Justice Alliance accepts no public dollars (for potential conflict of interest reasons) operating on several grants from a diverse set of private foundation sources.

**Place-Based Advocacy:** People have commitments to places, be they where they live, work or see themselves or their community interests. Where you start depends on your issue. Who are the people most affected by your issue? Are they the people who live in a particular city or neighborhood or does the issue demand statewide or national reform? Experience shows that local reform feeds state reform and state reform feeds national reform; there will be people who see their interests at each level. Local reform is dependent upon the people most affected on a day-to-day basis and when done well can exemplify best practices for broader statewide or system reform. Local leaders in Bridgeport envisioned a much larger effort emanating from their work to change state and national systems, which fostered the creation of the statewide Alliance and in turn, national participation with the National Juvenile Justice Network and the Campaign for Youth Justice, without which the Alliance would not have been as successful.

**Legislative Action:** Where juvenile justice reform is focused on legislative change it is critical that respected and powerful legislative leadership is cultivated. Juvenile justice is not a natural area of expertise for most legislators so it is important to uncover natural champions who are well-respected and who have influence. It is also critical that the state senate and house leadership as well as committee leaders in appropriations, human services, education and judiciary issues be educated and engaged. Some ways of engaging legislators include providing research findings, communications materials on best practices and the state of state's juvenile justice system; conducting educational forums at the legislature with well-respected national experts; ghost writing white papers or op-eds that will show other leaders how seriously these issues are taken by their peers; and maintaining regular communications about advances in other states. It may also be important for the coalition to hire a lobbyist to push and monitor specific legislation. (Be aware that coalitions cannot hire lobbyists with foundation or public funds so it is important to raise private unrestricted sources of support). It is also important to engage people who legislators tend to listen to like judges, state commissioners or prominent businesspeople. Finally, just like the general public, different legislators will respond to different arguments and messages, which should be tailored to their interests and perspective, whether focused on economic or public safety arguments or strictly on moral grounds. In Connecticut, we were fortunate to enlist a powerful, well-respected and passionate state representative early in the process who championed juvenile reform efforts and helped us enlist other powerful leaders from both houses and both parties.

**Communicate Your Message:** Effective coalitions need to find friends in the media to effectively communicate the message for reform. Good work not thoroughly publicized is like the sound of a tree falling in the woods. It is also essential that the general public get behind the issues. In many states like Connecticut the power in the legislature resides in the suburbs and it is important through the media to make juvenile justice issues come alive for suburban residents. Money spent on high-quality communications consultants is usually money well-spent. In 1985 RYASAP surveyed young people regarding their alcohol, tobacco and drug using behavior. When it was discovered that suburban youth actually drank more and used marijuana and cocaine to a greater degree than their urban counterparts, RYASAP put the data on 27 billboards in the greater Bridgeport area. The data displayed prominently along major routes

forced suburban communities to confront the fact that their children were not as innocent as presumed. In turn, suburban communities developed action plans to address the issue. In juvenile justice system reform in Connecticut the Alliance found several cases where suburban youth were affected and it used these cases to enlist suburban legislators in their cause.

**Run Programs to Prove Effectiveness:** There is significant debate on whether coalitions should run programs. Leslie Crutchfield in her book *Forces For Good* noted that the most effective advocacy comes from running the most effective programs, i.e., taking local best practices and replicating them on a larger scale. Her examples of Teach for America, City Year, YouthBuild and Habitat for Humanity are prime examples of very effective advocates who also provided high quality direct services. The argument against running programs usually comes from suspicion that members will only stay at the table as long as their organization is benefitting. But good advocacy can be enhanced by effective collaborative program solutions where many members benefit and the wealth is spread around. In Bridgeport, local coalitions run juvenile diversion boards, teen legal clinics, mediation centers and mentoring programs, many of which have been turned into best practices. Decision makers want to know what works to address this population of young people and they want to support their local best practices.

**Hospitality:** It is important to set the stage for effective coalition building. This involves building trust and teamwork. Where coalitions meet is important. It should be a welcoming place with good food and the proprietors should be welcoming. Each meeting should start with introductions where each member is given the opportunity to share information about their new initiatives, fundraisers, trainings, staff openings, program recruitment, etc. There should be time for networking so that members can share information about services, facilitate referrals or make new connections. All new participants as well as strangers should be warmly welcomed. A great coalition is a place where hospitality is not overlooked. Weddings, babies, anniversaries, special individual or organizational awards, etc. should be recognized and members should be encouraged to support one another in times of despair.

The work of building an effective juvenile justice reform coalition demands intense attention to all of the above details. Neglecting any one of them can cause collaboratives and coalitions to flounder.

For additional information contact:

Robert Francis  
Executive Director, RYASAP *Catalyst for Community Change*  
Co-Chair, Connecticut Juvenile Justice Alliance  
2470 Fairfield Avenue  
Bridgeport, CT 06605  
Ph. 203-579-2727  
Email. [rfrancis@ryasap.org](mailto:rfrancis@ryasap.org)  
Website. [www.ryasap.org](http://www.ryasap.org) for RYASAP and  
[www.ctjja.org](http://www.ctjja.org) for the Connecticut Juvenile Justice Alliance