

National Parent Caucus Information Packet



Do you work with families of children involved in the justice system?

Do you wonder how to help them?

**The National Parent Caucus, a project of the
Campaign for Youth Justice, may be the answer.**

National Parent Caucus

The National Parent Caucus offers families:

Support

Self-Advocacy Skills

Training on best practices & system reform

Individual Empowerment



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The National Parent Caucus; Meeting the Needs of Forgotten Families

By Grace Bauer

Beginning in 1998, with my son's first arrest at the age of 12, I embarked on a journey that I was ill equipped to handle. When I gave birth to my children I had high hopes and dreams for them, this arrest and the succeeding problems that lay ahead for him were never apart of those hopes and dreams. I, as most families that find themselves involved in the juvenile and criminal justice systems, was incredibly naive and made decisions based on what system professionals told me, never considering that it wasn't their job to help my son. Those decisions set a predictable course, for those with knowledge and understanding, for my son that would leave him emotionally and physically scarred for the rest of his life. I made those decisions without an understanding of what they meant for him or a conception of what it meant to have a "system involved" child. For the next three years, I walked this path alone in confusion and isolation.

I sat quietly ...

...in meetings where professionals talked about my son and didn't say anything because they presented themselves as the experts and seldom asked me anything

...in court rooms in front of a judge without an attorney or advocate because I was told an attorney would only slow down my son getting the help he needed and I believed this lie to be the truth

...outside the court house, on the day my son was adjudicated delinquent and sent to a far off facility because my legs would not carry me away from my baby and still believed I had done what was right

...by the phone for days awaiting a call from the facility to inform me of where my son would be placed and when I would be able to visit

...for 2 1/2 hour drives and then 5 1/2 hour drives to visit and sometimes be turned away upon arrival because he was in the infirmary or isolation

...in the car on the long drives back home with tears running down my cheeks and my heart in misery, the images of my son's battered body swirling through my mind, feeling sickened by my powerlessness and stupidity

...I sat through a visit with an attorney, nearly 3 months into what I believed would be a 90 day stay in an excellent program, only to be told by the attorney my son would not be coming home until his 18th birthday and that when he left that prison, I should buy him a ticket to Angola State Penitentiary because that is where most of these kids ended up

...on the phone with one of the first teachers permitted inside the Tallulah Correctional Center for Youth in Northeast Louisiana while she explained she had assessed my son and found him in isolation where he appeared to be on the brink of a nervous breakdown.

...as I heard the diagnosis of my son with severe depression and Post Traumatic Stress Disorder
...when the "New York Times" named Tallulah, where my son was housed, as "one of the worst in the nation"

But, a new day would come when I no longer sat quietly. I found my voice with the help of an organization founded by the families of the nearly 2000 children being warehoused in

That children of color are over-represented in the juvenile justice system and that they fare worse at every point in the system from arrest to disposition and incarceration. It is past time to address this and put proven methods in place to end disproportionate minority contact.

That children should be given community and evidence-based services and that funding should be diverted from expensive and ineffective prisons, detention centers and lock-ups into the kind of programs and services that meet high-quality standards and allow children to do well.

That there seem to be two systems of justice in this country; one that serves children of privilege and allows them to receive the care and services that help children grow healthy and strong and a second for poor children and/or children of color, a system that cages children, blames families and ignores the root causes of delinquent behavior.

Platform for Change

As parents, families, allies and loved ones of the nearly 2.2 million children that are arrested each year in the US, we are many, and there is no uncertainty of the need for serious change in a system plagued with abuse, neglect, poor outcomes for our children and our communities and scandals, each worse than the one before. In our collective experiences, we have witnessed the serious and sometimes deadly consequences of the system on our children. With these experiences in mind we put forth the following platform of change.

1. Federal, state and local lawmakers should enact policies that include families and youth in all matters pertaining to juvenile justice.
2. Families and youth should be engaged, included and valued participants at all juvenile justice decision-making tables.
3. Child advocacy organizations should provide families with their expertise on what problems exist within the system and educate families on best practice and evidence-based programming.
4. The millions spent on building and maintaining large wasteful institutions should be eliminated and funding should be expanded for evidence-based best practices.
5. Transparency should become a mainstay of all juvenile justice systems. Transparency must include the collection of accurate data, clear maps of where money is spent and on what, recidivism rates for all programming, outcomes of all programming, and a way that allows for the input of children and families in the evaluation process.

The Work of the Caucus

At the Campaign for Youth Justice, we believe that it will take grassroots campaigns across the country to change the flawed and ineffective policies and mandates that have driven decision-makers for far too long. The misinformation, myths and media hype that have propelled states

to enact tougher penalties that have failed miserably must now be confronted with accurate research and the firsthand accounts of those who have suffered from such ignorance.

The Caucus will provide a space in which families can come together for support, information and to share ideas. Through this network of families and allies we envision a place for families to give and receive information and experiences, to learn about what works, what doesn't, what has been tried and succeeded and what has failed. It will be a place to find resources and support and to make strategic decisions about what actions to take to achieve our goals.

Beginning with monthly calls among parents, families and allies will share all information about the juvenile justice system and the reform efforts. We will establish a database of families and allies as well as contact information list for all who wish to participate. With the help of a database we will then be able to disseminate information in a timely way to those who need it most. Families will also have access to the latest news and developments pertaining to best practices within juvenile justice and updates on other grassroots efforts for reform.

A volunteer committee will be established within the National Parent Caucus to provide support and resources to families currently involved in the system. Through our experiences it has become clear that we can't expect families to become a part of reform efforts without first providing them with support and resources from which they can begin to advocate on behalf of their own children. It is simply not enough to bring families into the reform efforts; we must share our expertise so that families find their own voice and become empowered to share that voice.

The National Parent Caucus will become a clearinghouse of information for parents needing specific information and support for their individual needs as well as linking them to a larger movement focused on making change in their communities, their states and on the national level. The efforts of reform will benefit from the growing body of knowledge within the National Parent Caucus and from the energy and experience of families and youth throughout the nation.

The Campaign for Youth Justice will bring its wealth of expertise to families and youth through technical assistance and guidance. By providing educational materials, successful campaign tools and skills to families and youth, the Campaign seeks to build a larger movement of reformists and family experts on juvenile justice issues.

It is the hope and the belief of the Campaign that families will get involved in an effort to help their own children and stay involved in the longer-term organizing reform efforts, thereby adding to number of family experts available to discuss and educate the public on this issue. We also have witnessed the deeper involvement and engagement of families and allies take place when they have been empowered and given the proper tools for success. The initial work done within the caucus then provides tools for the undertaking of other issues important to families, such as the school-to-prison pipeline, poverty, lack of opportunities in poor communities, systemic racism, disproportionate minority contact, poor education systems, lack

of accountability among government officials and the targeting of poor and/or children of color for the criminal justice system, just to name a few. This Caucus intends to serve as both an empowerment environment and transformational educational experience that lends to people organizing themselves for the good of their communities.

Activities

1. Create and disseminate widely a collective set of principles that ensure the improvement of our children's lives in the juvenile and criminal justice systems.
2. Provide support, information and assistance for the individual needs of families and their children.
3. Provide support, technical assistance, strategic planning and execution of grassroots efforts for reform.
4. Create a clearinghouse of useful and timely materials on juvenile justice issues and events.
5. Engage families in juvenile justice issues on the local level and include them in activities related to federal legislation in the best interest of all children.