



Making Room at the Table

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No one involved in youth justice reform doubts that family and youth involvement is key to successful outcomes for individual youth, or that their testimony can be incredibly powerful in advancing reform. Examples of either, unfortunately, are somewhat thin on the ground; even rarer, however, are examples of thriving youth and family member groups working as advocates, creating and advancing their own reform agenda.

One of the few exceptions is the [New Jersey Parents' Caucus \(NJPC\)](#), a non-profit organization (and part of the [New Jersey Juvenile Justice Reform Coalition](#), an NJJN member) founded in 1990 that is governed and staffed by a coalition of parents, family members and youth whose mission is to ensure that every family who has children with special emotional and behavioral needs is given an opportunity to play a strong and active role in the conceptualization, development and delivery of effective and timely services for their children. NJPC provides information & referral services, community outreach, training and education, advocacy and informal support, publications, and mental health, juvenile justice, and special education data analysis. It's also making serious progress as an advocate for youth justice reform through their NJ Youth Justice Initiative, ensuring leadership opportunities for impacted youth and their families.

This month, NJJN is highlighting NJPC's work as part of its 10th anniversary year. NJJN -- a national organization of 53 state-based groups working in 40 states on behalf of youth in trouble with the law (including a New Jersey-based coalition that includes the New Jersey Parents' Caucus). And each of NJJN's member organizations has endorsed [nine principles of youth justice reform](#), including the importance of [engaging youth, family, and community](#).

NJPC is living proof that the principle matters. "Ensuring families and youth are integrated at every level of decision-making – that's what reform is for us," says NJPC's executive director, Kathy Wright. "It requires a paradigm shift in our systems. It requires a new way of thinking...changing the way in which we view the world....An understanding that families and youth should not be ostracized from the real conversations, only speaking on their experiences, but rather allowing those experiences to evolve into the conversation and become central to the policy reform table."

Recently, the organization has been making significant headway on many fronts. This summer, for example, NJPC celebrated a significant policy win when [S2003/A4299 was signed into law](#). The bill limited the number of youth who could be waived into adult court, eliminated the use of solitary confinement as a disciplinary measure in juvenile facilities and detention centers, and ensured due process before a young person confined in a juvenile facility could be transferred to an adult prison.

Meanwhile, with the aid of the ACLU, Juvenile Law Center, Lowenstein & Sandler, and Rutgers Law Clinic, NJPC is moving ahead with litigation on cases to do with solitary confinement, lack of appropriate educational services for youth, and on youth transferred to adult prison without due process.

In May 2014, NJPC published a [parent and caregiver guide](#) to New Jersey's juvenile justice system – not just in English, but in Spanish, too. In addition to making it available on its website – and getting it posted on the websites of several national organizations working on juvenile justice reform — NJPC printed 1,500 hard copies, and had no trouble finding takers for every last copy.

"When your child enters the justice system," Wright says, "Very little time is taken to explain the process and your rights and responsibilities, and you are required to think at possibly one of the most overwhelming, confusing and emotionally draining periods of your life. So we tried to put into the guide all the lessons we've learned as parents, caregivers and family members. We hope it addresses all the questions family members would have – so they can better understand the system and make better choices for their children."

A year later, NJPC followed up the family guide with a [data brief](#) exposing some serious issues with the way in which New Jersey handles children and youth sent into the adult justice system. For example, the brief documented gross racial and ethnic disparities; showed that rates of incarceration in the adult prison system vary by zip code; youth are regularly deprived of due process; and that youth are regularly put into solitary confinement for lengthy periods, in spite of the known harms to their mental health.

And that's only a fraction of what the organization accomplishes every year — which goes to show why NJJN's members believe that engaging youth, families, and communities in the reform movement is crucial.

Want to do your part to create a fairer and more age-appropriate system for youth in trouble with the law? Find an [NJJN member organization near you](#), or make a donation to [NJJN support this work nationwide](#). (You can even type "#donate [\$ amount]" into a comment box on [our Facebook page](#) or tweet "#donate [\$ amount]" to @NJJNetwork.) Help your community adopt sensible strategies to ensure that youth in trouble with the law grow into responsible adults, and we will all benefit from safer communities.

[Part 8 in a series of posts celebrating NJJN's 10th anniversary and our nine principles of youth justice reform. See "[Why Youth Reentry Matters](#)"; "[First, Do No Harm](#)"; "[Got Gault? From Processing Youth to Due Process](#)," "[Protecting LGBTQ Youth in the Juvenile Justice System -- Progress and Opportunity](#)"; "[Blocking the School-to-Prison Pipeline is Key to Ending Racial Disparity in Prison](#)," "[The Best Way to Help Kids in the Juvenile Justice System? Keep them Out of It](#) and "[Rise for Youth: a Pathway out of the Juvenile Justice System](#)." --Ed.]

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