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Youth Voices in Juvenile Justice Reform

They can “make the most compelling cases,” but involving them can be “incredibly difficult.”

By Ed Finkel

When Shay Bilchik thinks about the potential of involving adjudicated youth in juvenile justice reform, he recalls the impact of foster children who helped persuade Congress to pass the Chafee Independent Living Act of 1999.

The bill “wasn’t going anywhere fast, until youth became involved in testifying and promoting it,” says Bilchik, former head of the Child Welfare League of America. “Lo and behold, a multimillion-dollar bill passed.”

At a time when states are rethinking their “get tough” juvenile justice policies and Congress is set to reauthorize the Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention Act, advocates are increasing their efforts to involve adjudicated youth in justice reform. Those efforts, however, face an array of challenges.

“The youth voice is being taken much more seriously than 15 years ago,” says Bilchik, who led the U.S. Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention during the Clinton administration and is now director of the Center for Juvenile Justice Reform and Systems Integration at Georgetown University in Washington. “It’s not easy for the youth themselves to mobilize. There are special considerations.”

“It’s a critical thing ... to involve young people who are directly affected by the system you’re trying to change,” says Sarah Bryer, director of the National Juvenile Justice Network. That’s because “the things you’re demanding are informed by the people they’re directly affecting, and because young people can sometimes make the most compelling cases for why things should be changed.”

But system-involved youth often feel too beaten down or disaffected to

step up, says Bryer, whose organization, along with the National Collaboration for Youth, published a policy brief on the subject in May (http://www.njcn.org/media/announcements/announcement_link_145.pdf).

that “what’s happened to them is part of a larger problem.”

Foster children tend to have less compunction than adjudicated youth about speaking up because they sense less stigma about their label, says Robert Schwartz, executive director of the Philadelphia-based Juvenile Law Center. “It’s not as though kids want to announce that they’ve been in the [justice] system, or identify themselves

thorized to do advocacy work.”

With some effort, Schwartz says, youth workers can find adjudicated youth “who are quite special [and] who are willing to speak about their past mistakes.”

Then come practical considerations, like providing transportation to meetings and rallies, scheduling gatherings at convenient times and offering small stipends.

Photo courtesy of YJC



Making their voices heard: Young people with the Youth Justice Coalition hold rallies and speak to the news media to get their point across.

that way,” he says. “You’re not going to the straight-A kids in the best high schools,” Bryer says. “You’re reaching out to kids in juvenile detention centers, on the streets – kids who might not feel as au-

thorized to do advocacy work.”

For youth workers to effectively reach out, they need an educational process of their own, says Renee Carl, director of policy and government re-

Continued

Promising Practices

lations for the National Collaboration for Youth.

"Giving young people the opportunity to grow and become leaders is es-

... to engage those young people, and do it in a positive way."

Among the strategies being pursued is online advocacy, says Thaddeus Fer-

Web-based advocacy effort.

"There's been an increased attention to the use of social networking sites, such as MySpace and Facebook, in engaging young people in advocacy," Ferber says. He cites a campaign led by the Connecticut Juvenile Justice Alliance, which used a "critical" online component organized by YPAC to help pass a state bill that moves 16- and 17-year-old offenders from adult courts to the juvenile justice system. The bill was signed into law in June.

Bryer calls that campaign "a tremendous victory. They had young people testify. At one of their educate-the-Legislature days, they had all of these young people and their peers who are going to benefit from this come to the

table."

Bilchik envisions a combination of nonprofit action networks that mobilize youth around specific bills or issues, and ongoing youth representation on government bodies that have input into juvenile justice policies. "It's important to bring youth to the legislative hearing table to have them tell their stories – not just to pull at the heartstrings, but to identify what should have been done differently," he says.

Following are profiles of efforts to involve youth in juvenile justice reform.

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"It's a critical thing ... to involve young people who are directly affected by the system you're trying to change."

—Sarah Bryer, National Juvenile Justice Network.

sential," she says. "It's also essential to provide professionals with the training and ongoing professional development

ber, program director of the Forum for Youth Investment and chairman of the Youth Policy Action Center (YPAC), a

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The Approach: Like many State Advisory Groups (SAGs), the one in Colorado has persistently struggled to fulfill one requirement: recruiting youth representatives.

Created by the Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention Act of 1974 to advise state officials, SAGs must have at least 20 percent youth representation to receive funding under the act. Among other things, SAGs make recommendations for coordinating juvenile delinquency programs and related services, such as health care and public assistance. Members are chosen by governors.

The Colorado SAG has 27 members, seven of whom are youth.

"It's incredibly difficult" to involve youth, says Meg Williams, a SAG member who is director of the state Division of Criminal Justice. "But it's very encouraging if you can engage them."

SAG Chairwoman Dianne Van Voorhees says the obstacles to youth participation include transportation, finding a meeting schedule that works for a diverse group, and the fact that youth don't always understand their roles on the SAG.

Lindi Sinton, the group's immediate past chairwoman, says the difficulties tend to revolve around the competition for the youths' time. The SAG meets quarterly, and "we're asking them to take full days out of their schedule" for those meetings, she

says.

Over the past couple of years, however, the Colorado SAG has had little trouble keeping itself stocked with youths. The keys have been improving support for youth members and giving them more authority, which has reduced turnover and made recruitment easier.

helpful step in attracting and retaining youth has been the formation of a youth subcommittee that meets separately and oversees a grant-making program for local, youth-led programs. She says that subcommittee can award about \$20,000 a year, with up to \$5,000 for each organization.

"Giving them the responsibility

ment "keeps us honest. ... We can sit around and talk about juvenile justice until we're blue in the face."

History: Neither Sinton nor Van Voorhees is certain when Colorado's SAG was established, but they believe it was within six years of the JJJPA's passage.

Youth Served: Williams says adult advisory group members recruit youth, looking primarily for "at-risk youth, which is a hard thing to necessarily identify," Van Voorhees says.

"We look at who comes in contact [with the system], who is over-represented. It's going to be youth of color, including Native Americans. It's going to be people who are not of the mainstream culture. ... It's going to be poor people." The SAG has also distributed fliers among college students.

Van Voorhees isn't sure how many of the youth members have had direct contact with the juvenile justice system.

Staff: Williams and two of her staffers in the state Office of Adult and Juvenile Justice Assistance focus on the SAG.

Funding: The SAG receives \$30,000 annually from the U.S. Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention.

Indicators of Success: Williams says it's difficult to quantify the SAG's impact because "what we do is so collaborative." For example, two years ago a legislative subcommittee on mental health joined forces with the SAG to create a task force that produced a plan and led to "a series of positive legislation" about youth mental health, she said.

Photo courtesy of Colorado SAG



Standing for youth: SAG youth member Jeremy Wilson (center) with staffer Anna Lopez and member Joe Higgins.

Each youth is now assigned a council member who serves as a "buddy" to guide him or her through the alphabet soup of acronyms and other jargon. "Some of the business stuff can be pretty dreadful," Sinton says. "It's not exciting."

Carrying out that concept "takes time and attention, but it's worth it," Williams says.

Van Voorhees says that another

[for the mini-grants] makes a huge difference," she says. "We're not just saying, 'It's nice to have you sitting there.' They're taking it on."

In addition, Van Voorhees says that because many adult SAG members work with the juvenile justice system in their jobs, they can offer job-shadowing opportunities for some of the youths.

Sinton says the youth involve-