

Families & Friends of Louisiana's Incarcerated Children  
Engaging Families in System Reform  
JDAI Inter-Site Conference

I am the Community Organizer for the Southwest La. chapter of Families & Friends of Louisiana's Incarcerated Children (FFLIC).

*FFLIC is statewide membership based organization dedicated to creating a better life for all of Louisiana's youth especially those involved in or targeted by the juvenile justice system. We use education, direct action organizing and peer-to-peer advocacy to build strong, powerful families and communities and to fight for justice for our children and ourselves.*

*From the street level to the state level, from our meeting rooms to the state capitol, we are working to build a society based on the principles of racial justice, human rights and full participation through the tireless fight for justice for our children.*

Full participation seems simple enough to say but what does it really mean? For families it means the right to be heard but also the power to make a difference in systems that care for our children. I came to work for FFLIC because of my own son's involvement in the Louisiana juvenile justice system; a system that once held nearly 2000 children in its secure care facilities. It wasn't enough to bring my own son home, for me it became about changing the fundamentals of a broken system that had failed my son and where no one within that system was held accountable for that failure.

There will come a time when folks like the Casey Foundation and others will be gone from your jurisdictions. Will reform and the changes that took place during reform remain? Only if the reform encompasses all stakeholders, including families, and empowers each stakeholder to sustain the changes over time. A system must take into account the needs of those it serves and those it serves must have a voice in holding that system accountable when it fails to meet those needs. It maybe touchy or tense, but systems need to see that it's a GOOD thing when parents and families challenge them and hold them accountable. It means they care and are engaged, if you trust what they say and embrace their input, they can be the best quality control you can have.

When families come to our organization they are looking for a few things, support, justice and help for their child. They are typically in crisis and it becomes my job as an advocate to meet the needs of that family through empowerment in a timely fashion and then once the crisis has passed, to build a relationship with them that hopefully will lead to their future involvement in larger issues of social change including jj reform. The crisis may require me to find transportation, money to pay the electric bill or help them decide if a program is sufficient to meet the needs of their child. Many times, I am simply there to hear a parent that no one else has heard. There is a process to this that has emerged over time and through countless stories of families' experiences. In the beginning there is confusion, sadness, hurt and frustration at themselves, their children and the system. Middle way into the process anger becomes the

strongest emotion. And then last comes a deeper understanding of the many complex root causes of their family's crisis and a desire to see better for their own child and for many, a desire to see better for all children. So how do system folks engage that desire in families to create strong, effective and lasting reform?

The following are 7 strategies we have used in building our organization and we believe the strategies can be helpful as systems begin to involve families.

1. **Invite parents, other family and community members to the table.** This may seem a little silly to mention but as a parent that has been involved in the system for better than 7 years, I know that often times we are simply not invited. Many system folks say they want our input but in truth are afraid to hear what we are going to say. Admittedly it is tough to hear the anger and hurt of families - but believe me, it is far more tough to stand and *tell* your story of hurt, anger, powerlessness and shame, unsure whether the listeners may blame you for your problems, or judge you as a parent. When we tell our stories, especially about what our experience with the system has been, it's not a personal attack on anyone. Don't take it personally. The *only* thing that's personal, in fact, is the story we are being brave enough to share with you – and that is very personal to us. Instead of getting defensive, use the opportunity to assess the quality of care and the way in which it is delivered.

**For example:** How many folks in this room have a child in the system? Point made! System folks have said to me, “we don't have parents that want to be involved”. **Yes, you do!** You haven't found them but I can promise you in every jurisdiction there are parents that want to have a say and care about system reform. Your job is to find these folks and invite them to the table.

2. **Recognize multiple forms of meaningful engagement**

Some families will be most interested in the work because their child is involved in the system and they will come with a great deal of raw personal experience and pain, some may be interested regardless of their child's status and some may be interested for either of these reasons but have no time or ability for whatever reason to come to a meeting. Wherever they are, physically or emotionally, there can be meaningful engagement between parents and other system reformers if everyone understands that input and engagement can happen in many different ways, not just at professional meetings.

**For example:** FFLIC uses multiple ways to engage members – we send newsletters and ask for submissions from folks who can't or don't want to come to meetings. We call and survey when we make decisions as well as to say hello and check in. If a family is concerned with keeping the lights on and food on the table there is no time for sitting through long meetings that usually occur during working hours anyway. A phone call from a caring family advocate offering assistance in meeting a need or listening to a tired mother would make more sense and gain greater results. The advocate can then get meaningful input by asking questions about how a specific program is meeting the needs of the child and family or if the process for reporting a complaint is worth the effort.

- 3. Leveling the playing field.** How many of you feel like you sit in too many meetings? How many of you sit in those meetings for free? For most families, system reform is not the only priority and it certainly doesn't pay the bills. Why should we ask parents – especially those who are low income/poor - to volunteer their time for free when everyone else in the room gets paid for their work? If you want family involvement and you honestly believe parents and families are as important as the other stakeholders, you must level the playing field whether through stipends or at least funds to cover transportation, lost time at work, childcare costs, food and other financial hardships. Think too about the time of day you hold your stakeholder meetings and where you hold these meetings. Do the times work for the families you want involved or just the professionals? And are they held near the neighborhoods of the families or uptown near your offices?

**Consider this:** I know a grandmother that lives on the outskirts of the city. Her grandson has been involved in the system on and off for several years and though she is not the main caregiver of this boy she is concerned about the juvenile justice system and the children that become involved in the system. She is a valuable stakeholder with a lifetime of experience to share with others. She has no dependable transportation and earns money to cover her medical bills by sitting with elderly in her neighborhood. Is she going to give up 3 hours of her paying job that covers her medicine costs to sit in a meeting that she will have a hard time getting to anyway? Would you? But perhaps if she is offered a stipend for the time she spends meeting plus money for gas which she can give to a relative to drive her to and from, she would be able to share her insight and expertise with the group.

- 4. Make the table more parent/community friendly.** But in saying this let me be clear, FFLIC **does not** believe parents are deficient or that we need something extra because we are different. How many of you know what the acronym CYPB means? It means Children and Youth Planning Board but if you don't live in La. and work in the juvenile justice field you probably would not know that. What about the term "jump out boys"? Does that mean anything to you? Probably not, it is term used by kids to describe a police task force in our community. We all use different language in our daily lives and professions. The same is true of our organization, we all come from different places and have different levels of understanding. We created guidelines to bridge the differences and possibly getting all of the stakeholders to agree early on a set of guidelines can help facilitate this process.

**For example:** FFLIC is a growing organization and in the past five years we have become over 900 hundred members strong. Every month in the Southwest corner of the state we have chapter meetings. These meetings are usually attended by experienced members that have been involved for many years and newcomers that are often just finding themselves and their children involved in the juvenile justice system. It has been a challenge to meet the needs of both groups but it is important for these two groups to share in the information each can provide. In planning for these meetings we consider the needs of both groups and create ways for both groups to be heard. Challenging? Yes! Impossible? No! The one thing FFLIC realized early on was the critical importance of both groups and it would be wise for jurisdictions committed to reform to do the same when considering family involvement.

5. **Clear expectations.** What do you want from families and community members? How much do you *really* want to know? When you hear their truths are you going to act to remedy certain obstacles faced by families? Are parents just there to give input (or worse legitimacy) or are they truly equal partners and decision makers? The system folks must be willing to share their vision of what a reformed system looks like and where families and parents fit into it. If this vision doesn't meet the needs of families are you willing to consider what it will take to do so?

**Consider:** If you spent several hours a week or month in a meeting, sharing your ideas and thoughts on any given subject and those views were never given credence, how long would you continue to show up at those meetings? Probably not very long. How about if you are upset about a service or product you purchase. You call the manager and complain, you expect that complaint to be taken seriously and for the problem to be addressed. If it isn't, how likely are you to take the time to do it again later on? Given the time constraints we all face in our busy lives, it is not very likely that we would waste our precious time filing complaints that make no difference.

6. **No one knows what it is like to struggle with a child in the system better than another parent.** System folks may not be the best leaders for parents. Many parents come to the system with distrust of the system already firmly ingrained in their mind. For many communities this distrust is well founded. Don't expect families or community to automatically trust in a system that has failed them before. Support the creation of family networks or fund family centered organizations to bridge some of these gaps.

**For example:** FFLIC advocates are parents of children once in the system or currently in the system. These mothers have a perspective that no one else could possibly have. They have had the feelings of shame, anger, fear, isolation that other parents feel. Through support, peer-to-peer advocacy and education they have gained strength and courage that has empowered them to speak out about what it takes to bring about true system reform.

7. **Treat families and community as you would like to be treated.** Don't patronize families, trust me we know when we are being patronized. Don't make assumptions about us, you know very little about our day-to-day lives and our struggles. You may know what our household income is but that doesn't tell you about our work ethic. You may know what community we live in but you may not know why we live there, if by choice or by circumstance. Never underestimate our strengths, capacity or abilities.
- For example:** When my son entered into the state system, the probation officer charged with finding appropriate placement for our son called us in for a staffing. The stated intention of this meeting was to figure out why our son was having problems and find out as much as possible about him so that appropriate services could be provided. As a mother I left this two hour meeting confused, scared and feeling like I was the worst parent on earth. At the end of the meeting I was left vulnerable, my emotions raw and battered. If I ever believed I could help my son any sense of the power to do so was completely stripped from me in that two-hour staffing. I was judged, misjudged and belittled by this man and the process. The only hope left to me was that system folks, that knew more than I and had years of experience, would help my son. It would only take a few months before I would learn a very hard lesson, the state knew less than I did.

Unfortunately, my lesson came at the expense of my already vulnerable 12-year old son. Had I known what I know now, the outcome could have been much different for my now 20-year old son. Had the system listened to me and reacted appropriately today my son might be working and raising a family instead of sitting in an adult prison. Had we worked together to address the trauma of death in my son's life, instead of giving him ten days in the detention center so he would "straighten up," today he might have the skills he needs to handle the world around him. If when I began making complaints, had there been a process to address those complaints in an effective way, perhaps my son would not have spent months in isolation, which only added to his depression and sense of failure.

There were many opportunities for things to be different for my son, all wasted opportunities. Don't waste the opportunities that you now have in reforming your juvenile justice system. You must make a choice and be committed to having families, youth and community involved. It takes strategic thinking, planning and hard work but in empowering families to be a part of system reform you are ensuring a long lasting legacy of true reform in your jurisdictions.

Thank you.