



JDAI NEWS

Juvenile Detention Alternatives Initiative Newsletter

January 2020

NEWSLETTER PREFACE

Greetings Juvenile Justice Stakeholders:

This quarter's newsletter focuses on the importance of Youth and Family Voice.

As the Justice Reform Team began to develop this newsletter, we were privileged to speak to youth and parents from all over the State. A pattern of thoughts and experiences emerged very quickly from the stories we heard. While each one was grateful for the place they found themselves in at the time of the interview and understood/felt the stakeholders they encountered engaged with good intention, each also felt that their thoughts, perspective, and partnership had been devalued or left out at some point during the process. *"A definite purpose, like blinders on a horse, inevitably narrows its possessor's point of view."* Robert Frost

As a juvenile justice system, we must constantly strive to improve the ways in which we work to serve and rehabilitate the youth and families. While accountability is an important factor in our work, the ultimate goal of the system is to identify the right path for each youth and family that will result in their independent ability to remain crime free. To do this effectively, we must meet the youth and families where they are and create an environment that allows them to grow in partnership with us.

Recently, the Florida Youth Justice Commission meet with its State-Level Youth Advocacy Council. During this meeting, a very thought-provoking question was asked which sparked deep conversations within the committee. *"What do you see us as? When we are in shackles, our mom's maybe crying, what do you see us as? Do you see us as criminals or do you see us as kids?"* Florida Youth Advocate A. Tucker

This newsletter is designed to provoke thoughts about the way we engage. After being in this field for a while, its easy to project the concerns related to a small population onto a much broader group. Your perspective directly impacts the way you engage. Let's constantly monitor our perspectives and seek for constant improvement in our work. *"Taking constructive criticism from others is required to get to the next level."* Wendy Starland



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For more information about JDAI, please visit:

[http://www.djj.state.fl.us/research/latest-initiatives/juvenile-detention-alternatives-initiative-\(jdai\)](http://www.djj.state.fl.us/research/latest-initiatives/juvenile-detention-alternatives-initiative-(jdai))

Meet the Newest Coordinator

Meet LaTonia Taylor, the newest member of the Florida JDAI family! LaTonia is a proud retired Navy Sailor. She arrived in Jacksonville in 2002 and decided to make it her home. She retired from the U.S. Navy in 2005. LaTonia has been with the Department of Juvenile Justice since 2013. She started out at the Juvenile Assessment Center (JAC) and later moved on to the supervision unit where she was promoted to the position of senior juvenile probation officer.

She has a Bachelor of Administration Degree with a focus on Organizational Management. LaTonia is married and has a beautiful daughter and an awesome five year old grandson.



LaTonia Taylor
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North East Region



Youth and Family Advocacy

It is critical for juvenile justice stakeholders to value and embrace the voice of youth and families as a pivotal component of our work. The youth and families we serve are the experts on what they need to be successful.

The juvenile justice system should play a supportive role to families by providing ample opportunities and resources for effective engagement. Oftentimes, the system *tells* the youth what they need. The inherent failure is in neglecting to give the youth the power to *say* what they need. Opening these lines of communication empowers them to get involved, advocate and help make critical decisions regarding their lives. Furthermore, the role of the family may be one of the most prevalent factors in ensuring a seamless transition out of the juvenile justice system. Taking the time to hear and understand the youth's perspective can empower them with a sense of responsibility and provide a sense of control over their reality. Bringing the voices of youth and families to the forefront has a significant impact. Their input and involvement is the key to unlocking the doors to success.

Food for Thought: When we encounter youth on the street misbehaving, do we see a criminal or a kid? When we identify that kid that seems to constantly get into trouble in our schools, do we see a nuisance or a child in need? When we encounter that angry parent, are we annoyed or concerned? Accountability is a part of our work, but do we administer it in a way that leaves our customers feeling demeaned or is it delivered in a manner that allows them to know we care about their well-being are working to truly "turn around the lives of troubled youth"?



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Youth Advocacy Council (YAC)

In understanding the importance of the youths' voices, the Florida Youth Justice Commission (FYJC) established the Youth Advocacy Council (YAC), a program committed to teaching and guiding youth



to become effective advocates for the improvement of the juvenile justice system. The FYJC accepted applications from youth within residential commitment programs throughout the state to assemble the inaugural session of this program, representing a diverse, motivated team from around the state. The youth are developing an understanding of the importance of their perspective on the juvenile justice system, how to discover, evaluate and create solutions to areas of improvement within the system, and how to properly communicate this information to various stakeholders across all levels. The curriculum is set with nine sessions, each consisting of one hour of material, homework, reflection and growth. The guidance and development of these youth will continue beyond the curriculum with the support of their mentors provided by FYJC, the facilitators of the YAC training course, and the members of FYJC. This inaugural cohort graduated from the internship/advocacy training portion of membership on January 21, 2020, culminating with a presentation to the FYJC about why they chose to become advocates.

Post-graduation, these youth will become voting members of the YAC, deciding as a team what they will advocate for and continue to progress in their professional development goals. Once the youth have completed their residential programs, they will then continue advocating as community members while pursuing their professional development.

Our goal is to create a unified team of young men and women to provide the necessary voice to push for appropriate reforms in policy and practices in the juvenile justice system, to ensure that every youth who would enter the system would be allowed every opportunity to succeed, guided by the voices of those who have gone before them.

For more information, please contact Ash Baca at Ashley.Baca@dji.state.fl.us



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Inspiring Others to Achieve Greatness: Chance's Story

Before transferring to the AMIkids Pinellas, Chance was struggling with defiance, bullying, and truancy within the larger public education setting. His parents were determined not to give up on him and to advocate for him every step of the way. After several meetings within the school district, his parents were informed of the AMI Pinellas education program and decided to go for it. AMI offers a wide variety of programs and models designed to address youth issues on an individual basis. Chance has now been enrolled in the program for 11 months.

Chance has successfully embraced the 13-Values of AMIkids Pinellas since day one. He has been a model student and friend to the other students in the program. Chance is one of the highest ranking members in the AMI Pinellas program and grades have improved tremendously. Due to that, Chance has an opportunity to receive college tuition assistance. AMIkids staff state it has been a pleasure to have Chance come into their program and be the example of why they do this work.

Chance inspires those around him to be better. He is either trying to encourage or help others with his words or actions. He is not perfect, and he owns his mistakes, which can be a hard thing for student's his age to embrace. Chance provides them with that example of leadership, integrity and trustworthiness. He is successfully becoming a better version of himself without realizing it. That is priceless and we know great things will come from this young man.





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Speaking Out to Advocate for Change: Brandon's Story

Brandon Griggs has lived in Jacksonville's Northside since he was a child. Having been raised by a single mother and seeing many of his family members and friends go in and out of the juvenile justice system, he wanted to do something about the grim outcomes of young people who like himself who were at-risk for or had been incarcerated.

This led Brandon to found Hear the Youth, an entirely teen-led organization whose mission is to give a voice to minority youth who have experienced the juvenile justice system firsthand. This enables Hear the Youth's members to present issues and concerns regarding juveniles to local officials with authenticity. These talks and presentations have led to change in many key areas that impact young people. This includes meeting with the Duval County Public School Superintendent, who thanks to Hear the Youth's efforts, has introduced policies to provide all students countywide with internet access. Hear the Youth has also collaborated with the Harvard Graduate School of Education to improve outcomes for African-American youth.

The changes they have created are important because studies have shown that a youth that does not have family and financial stability, has mental health issues, or cannot perform well in school (due to lack of access to technology), can be more prone to engaging in criminal activity.



Brandon Griggs is the founder of Hear the Youth and a junior at Robert E. Lee High School. He currently serves as the only teen member of his city's Crime Reduction Task Force, where he strongly advocates for juvenile justice reform. Griggs, Brandon "Youth Today", How Youth Voices Can Help Us Keep Kids Away from the Juvenile System, 31 July 2019.

For more information, please watch Brandon's TEDx talk on the link between illiteracy and incarceration here: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jtX9iYqPW38>



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LETTER FROM A PARENT

Editor's Note: In order to create meaningful change, it is imperative that we as the juvenile justice system take to heart the types of issues brought forth in this parent's letter.

Dear Juvenile Justice Stakeholders,

I want to begin by saying the juvenile justice system is exactly that a system. There's absolutely nothing good about our children being in it. In life, our children will make bad choices as we have all done. While I understand they must make amends for what they have done, I can't help but wonder if there isn't another way. Last year, my son made some bad choices that resulted in a juvenile residential placement for a minimum of six months. As a mother, having your child taken away from you with no control over the decision or voice in any part of the process is the worst feeling in the world. I had done my best to raise my son and ensuring that I was involved and devoted to motherhood. Having the privilege of knowing him all his life, I had some ideas about what was needed to help him make a turn back onto a positive path. As opposed to the partnership that I thought would be forged between myself and the juvenile justice system to create positive outcomes for my child, I found myself feeling alienated and that my voice didn't matter. When I was told my son would be sent out of the county, a number of concerns began to arise. My number one concern was would my child be mistreated, abused, or neglected. I didn't have any real understanding of what a program was. I worried if the program placement would hurt his education. I had questions like, "Would he be able to graduate?", "Would he be able to receive a high school diploma?", "Was my son treated fairly by the court system?", "How far would he be going?", "Would he learn more negative behaviors while in the program?", and "Would the placement into this program make a positive difference in his life?". I had to really trust God because I know that He would not put more on him than he could bare. I only wish I had been allowed to be a partner at the table during the entire process so that I could understand what was happening. So far things have been moving in a positive direction. I am very attentive and communicate often with my son's case manager, therapists, and probation officer to ensure that he is behaving and progressing toward his treatment goals. This journey is not easy. It will soon be over as long as my son is dedicated to doing what's right to get him back where he belongs. I'm committed to helping my son become and remain a positive, productive citizen. I will be his support system once his time of juvenile justice involvement is completed. My voice should matter.

I'm fully aware most juvenile justice stakeholders have the best of intentions. You're given all kinds of tools to determine what should be done. I'd like you to consider that the voice of a concerned parent could be your most powerful asset. How much value to do give the opinions of involved parents? Are they seen as less than because their child has committed a crime or seen as a parent in need of your public service?

~ A Devoted Mother