



## **OJJDP FY 2022 Regional Listening Session: Southwest**

August 22, 2022 | 2–4 p.m. ET

### **Priority #1: Treating Children as Children**

#### **1. What does it mean to you to treat children as children?**

##### **a. What do you think are best practices for treating children as children?**

- I read in a book that you don't put a tadpole on the stand and say this tadpole is a frog, when it is clearly a tadpole. For youth involved in the system, they are being treated as an adult when you don't even have an education. They don't understand the playing field. It does not make sense. You treat kids by helping them find their identity within the culture and realm that they are living in. The youth that are incarcerated are brown- and black-skinned youth. There is an adjustment that needs to be made but that is being ignored. Brown- and black-skinned youth are easier to be treated as something else.
- You are calling youth of color a "super predator" because of things out of their control. Their parents are drug users, they are uneducated. To say that they cannot be helped is a problem.
- Some kids don't get a chance to be kids. We work with kids who grow up with gangs. They don't understand what a parent is, they don't understand what a trusted adult is. I think the biggest things about being a kid is to invest in their ability to play and have a free space to reclaim that part of their lives. We say this same thing with those struggling with domestic violence or addiction and we need to extend this same ideal to children.
- There needs to be more upstream diverting funding sources. We need to divert law enforcement out of the equation and instead place social workers to address community issues.
- Youth involved in the system have to take on so many responsibilities at such a young age. Some have to take care of their siblings. Some never have a childhood experience where they get toys. I think you need to meet kids where they are at instead of assuming who they are by what is written down on paper. You need to talk to them directly and understand where they are coming from and acknowledge their personhood outside of who we think they are.
- The biggest teacher is being able to correct yourself. You treat children as children by treating them with kindness and understanding. These kids have their childhood taken away from them and just because they are 17, 18 years old doesn't mean that they are capable of making all of these adult decisions.
- Investing in them. Make sure that kids have everything they need to thrive and raise them as if they were your own. Education is harder to access. It is so much easier to lock youth up instead of doing the work of educating and loving them first.
- We want to eliminate juvenile probation. It is punitive and harmful. The goal of our department is to provide credible messengers, restorative justice practitioners, 24-hour youth centers, etc., in underserved communities. What we don't want is to place children in the hands of law enforcement.

#### **2. What are some challenges the region is currently facing when trying to treat children as children?**

- We are up against this mentality that more prisons keep us safe.
- There is pushback on the juvenile probation department. There is a lot of defensiveness on the probation's part and the lack of desire because of the potential to be defunded. For us, it is an



issue of pushing back on the status quo and thinking of a strategy to get other agencies funded. We have also seen the local probation union pushing back because they don't want their staff to lose their jobs.

- A challenge we face in [state redacted] is the narrative that is put on youth in the media, the vocabulary used is very harmful and that causes an effect on all aspects of our society and systems.

### **3. What can OJJDP do to advance this key priority through the kinds of strategies and activities it undertakes? (For example, communications, webinars and training, publications, policy guidelines, and pilot programs.)**

- Grant guidance or grant writing workshops so local service providers, community members and program facilitators can access funding to youth directly. Access to funding continues to make and keep gatekeepers.
- Better federal indirect rates can be offered or grants that offer more robust technical assistance.
- To have the ability to have better access to data is important. If we go after funding to OJJDP, having the data would help us prop up our program staff.

### **4. What can OJJDP do to support early intervention for youth before they enter the juvenile justice system?**

- We want people working with youth who understand the culture of the communities in which they serve. We also want the community to be the "experts" on how to take care of their community and their youth. A lot of this work comes down to prevention. You need to take the time to build rapport with the youth to build confidence and trust and these communities do not always have those resources or education to know how to tackle some of their complex issues.
- How does policing deal with mental illness? You don't send the police to someone who is dealing with mental health issues. Having police in these communities is so harmful.
- There are generational traumas that are trying to work against the current system and so it sets that family to fail. We need to have better cultural competencies and healing generational and historical trauma.
- In [state redacted], there is a lack of youth leaders. I could have used a youth leader when I was going through the system.

## **Priority #2: Serving Young People at Home, in Their Communities, With Their Families**

### **1. What does it mean to you to serve young people at home, in their communities, with their families?**

- a. What do you think are best practices for serving young people at home, in their communities, with their families?**
  - We need youth peer-support workers.
  - There is a disconnect within our own community. Admittedly, our community does not always know how to be supportive so there is a lack of education here, too. There are so many things



that we have to address within our own culture.

- We need better navigation and support that is not system-focused. We need to focus on education and health needs. A lot of the youth and the families that we work with do not trust the systems in place because of historical trauma. So having help within the household is key here.
  - Simple things like Wi-Fi connection, transportation needs, caregivers, etc., are all things that are not accessible. In-person court hearing are obstacles that people in the community need to overcome, and they are the ones who bear the burden. We can come up with more creative ways to ensure those families have access to these programs.
  - Just because someone has parents does not mean that they have a family. It is important to understand home and family dynamics. Youth who are in the system oftentimes do not have a trusted adult in their life. We believe in mentorship and providing academics.
  - Culturation. Institutions have yet to prove themselves and so a lot of families do not trust the system.
- b. Do you have specific examples of implementing community-based alternatives and involving families in the treatment of youth?**
- We are putting up a pilot program for youth in our county. The essential goal for this is to place a team in a high school with the hope of showing that there are alternatives to school resource officers and law enforcement, that there are intervention models that are available to them.
  - We invest heavily in education for our youth to help pull them out of this generational poverty. We also advocate for our youth to the local university to let them in and build equity and access.

## **2. In what ways do you involve families in the treatment of young people in their homes?**

- Capacity building, family involvement.
- Treatment and mental health services that may be needed.
- We have a large refugee population here. There are some hot spots where we are having an increase in youth from refugee communities being impacted in the juvenile justice system. The county is trying to figure out what we can do. From a state level, we need to come up with solutions to this. One thing that they mentioned is that the youth will understand the system, but their parents don't. The child can use this knowledge and weaponize it against their parents, for example, false allegations of abuse would lead to a parent being locked up. Our state wants to ensure that parents are propped up and have better access to education in this realm, so they are not fearful of the system, but instead, look at it as a resource.

## **Priority #3: Opening up Opportunities for System-Involved Youth**

### **1. What does it mean to you to open up opportunities for youth involved in the juvenile justice system?**

- Overall, the political environment can be a challenge. Cultural competency and transportation are general issues our communities face.
- We live in one of the most expensive markets in the United States, so housing is a big issue. There is just not enough housing or resources available that is accessible to youth.
- We need help to redefine what homelessness means. There are a lot of youth that are couch surfing or are not rent secure who are not defined as homeless, even though they do not have a



permanent residence.

- Housing, funding, job security, educational, leadership and professional development opportunities for folks with records.
- Collateral consequences – juvenile records that are not automatically sealed after completion of probation, unclear pathways for the sealing of juvenile arrest records when the youth is arrested but does not have their case filed in court, youth restitution and fines/fees.

## **2. Please share your ideas for reducing referrals and the flow of youth from the mental health system to juvenile justice.**

### **a. What ideas do you have to reduce referrals from the education system to juvenile justice system?**

- For the education part, I say proper trainings for the teachers and better culturally based curriculum.
- I think mentorship and having kids have a positive role model would be beneficial. School was my release and so I think if we can build up schools to be a safe haven for kids, that would be really life changing for them.

## **3. What can OJJDP do to advance this key priority through the kinds of strategies and activities it undertakes? (For example, communications, webinars and training, publications, policy guidelines, and pilot programs.)**

- The purpose of the government is to get them in the passenger seat and get communities in the driver seat. We need the gas (funding) in our car.
- There should be bonus points if an organization props up underserved communities. The reality is not everyone has access to a great grant writer, so if we are truly building equity, we need to incentivize performance points directly to organizations that are minority led.
- Advancing policy guidelines around record sealing policies/practices and fines/fees—specifically recommending automatic record sealing and the elimination of juvenile fines/fees in all states.