

DARYL FOX: Good afternoon, everyone, and welcome to today's webinar, "Youth Justice Action Month: Justice Is ____," hosted by the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention. Today, we have a host of wonderful speakers to be able to join us today, starting off with Administrator Liz Ryan of the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention; Tracey Tucker, Co-Executive Director of the National Juvenile Justice Network, alongside Alani Rouse, Youth Program Organizer with NJJN, as well. And then, lastly, Myla Roundy with the Emerging Leaders Committee Member of Howard University and the Coalition for Juvenile Justice, who will be providing remarks via video today. At this time, it's my distinct pleasure to introduce Liz Ryan, Administrator of the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention, for welcoming remarks to begin the presentation. Administrator Ryan.

LIZ RYAN: Good afternoon. Thank you for joining us for the Youth Justice Action Month YJAM Kickoff Webinar. I'm Liz Ryan, the Administrator of the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention, or OJJDP. Last week, President Biden again proclaimed October as Youth Justice Action Month, recommitting the Administration's support to expanding opportunities for all our nation's children and building a justice system that allows our youth to thrive. I'm very excited to speak with you today to share OJJDP's plans for YJAM, and to tell you about some of our recent activities on behalf of our nation's young people.

First, I'd like to share a little bit of YJAM's history. YJAM was inspired by tragedy. In 2008, a 17-year-old boy, Jonathan McClard, died by suicide while being held in solitary confinement in an adult jail. Jonathan had endured repeated threats and beatings by some of the adults in the jail. His mother, Tracy McClard, channeled her grief into action. She became an advocate for juvenile justice reform and fought to end the incarceration of youth in the adult criminal justice system, a goal OJJDP shares. Ms. McClard started the movement we now call YJAM, an annual observation to raise awareness about young people impacted by the juvenile justice system and inspire action on their behalf. Action is the key word here because system reform requires action. Action changes lives. It can save lives. Young people impacted by the justice system need our support and our advocacy, just as much today as they did 15 years ago.

OJJDP's celebration of YJAM 2023 continues what Ms. McClard began, with a month's worth of activities designed to educate and galvanize communities, advocates, and policymakers. OJJDP is cohosting YJAM 2023 with our partners, the Coalition for Juvenile Justice and the National Juvenile Justice Network, CJJ and NJJN. You'll be hearing from them in just a few moments. OJJDP is immensely proud to be working with CJJ and NJJN again this year. Our goals and priorities closely align.

OJJDP envisions a nation where our children are free from crime and violence and where youth contact with the justice system is rare, fair, and beneficial. We embrace a vision of opportunity for young people that emphasizes community-based services.

Three priorities guide our work. First, treating children as children. Second, serving youth at home with their families and in their communities. And third, opening up opportunities for young people who come into contact with the juvenile justice system.

Central to each of OJJDP's priorities is our unwavering commitment to racial equity and fairness, and the partnering with youth and families who are directly impacted by the juvenile justice system. We strive to recognize and confront the marginalization and racism that too many young people encounter every day. And we're committed to listening to and learning from youth who encounter the juvenile justice system firsthand to gain their insights on what works, what doesn't, and why. OJJDP is committed to our nation's youth to ensuring their welfare and providing opportunities and tools that expand their chances for success. Simply put, young people are at the heart of everything OJJDP does. And that compels us to listen to their insights. We want to work with youth, not just for them.

This year's YJAM theme is "Justice Is____." It's an incomplete sentence—a fill in the blank. And that's by design. Justice isn't a one-size-fits-all concept. Its meaning varies depending on who you are, where you live, how you live, and dozens of other factors. What does justice mean to you? By leaving the definition open, we are inviting system-involved youth, their families, and allies to participate in our mission, to collaborate on new approaches to youth justice and system reform. New ways to support youth and new avenues for opportunity.

OJJDP believes we must elevate the voices of those who are most impacted by the systems we seek to change. I assure you we listen to those voices. There will be many opportunities to participate in YJAM events throughout October, including policy roundtables hosted by communities across the country. Youth, their voices, and insights will be at the center of each.

Last month, OJJDP celebrated the 49th anniversary of the Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention Act, landmark legislation that established our Office and charged us with protecting children and improving the nation's juvenile justice system. As we celebrated, we also reflected on how far the youth justice field has come since 1974.

Over the years, OJJDP funding has supported national efforts to prevent child abuse, locate missing and exploited children, and combat Internet crimes against children. We've worked to create effective interventions for youth who have committed delinquent acts and

provide mentors to children and youth before they ever become involved in the justice system.

I'd like to highlight some of OJJDP's recent work on behalf of our nation's youth. In 2022, OJJDP hosted 16 listening sessions and town halls with stakeholders from across the country, including youth and families. In 2023, we collaborated with federal partners and national organizations to host additional listening sessions, focusing especially on tribal youth and young people in rural areas.

At these meetings, we repeatedly heard about the needs of young people who are transitioning back home after residential placement and the barriers they face, like being burdened with court-imposed fines and fees they don't have the means to pay. Youth and families called for a robust reentry system that addresses basic needs, like housing, food, and transportation. They said that adult and peer mentors can help system-involved young people connect with wraparound services, treatment programs, and employment opportunities.

This feedback echoes what OJJDP hears every day from the youth justice professionals. It mirrors what we know about successful programs to prevent violence and delinquent behavior by youth. Young people know what they need. They know what has worked for them and what has not. OJJDP listened. We are still listening. And we are taking steps to ensure we integrate youth voices into everything we do.

I'll give you a few examples. OJJDP formed a youth and family working group in 2022 to help us establish best practices, assess programs, and ensure that we partner effectively with young people and families who are directly impacted by the juvenile justice system. A few months ago, our Opioid Affected Youth Initiative created a youth advisory board. Young people acting as advocates for youth who are impacted by opioids and substance use disorders. The board raises up to OJJDP issues their peers face and helps us develop strategies to engage and assist them. OJJDP is exploring how to integrate youth into our grant awards process. We've invited young people with lived experience in the juvenile justice system to serve as peer reviewers who are paid to evaluate competitive grant applications. Their input will support OJJDP's efforts to make fair, equitable, and objective funding decisions.

OJJDP also expects our grantees to listen and respond to the young people they serve. This year, for the first time, every OJJDP solicitation includes language urging prospective grantees to tell us in their funding applications how they are partnering with youth and families. We want to know that the programs we fund are modeling our priorities.

We're here today to celebrate the first of our YJAM events, but I assure you that OJJDP's commitment to action on behalf of youth has always extended far beyond the month of October.

As OJJDP looks forward to its 50th anniversary next year, we're busy planning numerous activities and celebrations, including a national convening on youth justice. It's going to be a momentous gathering of young people and their families, researchers, practitioners, policymakers, and advocates from across the country. Be sure to follow OJJDP on social media. We'll be sharing more details soon.

For many years, the juvenile justice system focused primarily on harm reduction. Now we understand the importance of youth wellbeing. The young people need and deserve supports and services that will help them grow into their best selves. That means ensuring that our youth maintain relationships within families and the communities that support them. It means ensuring access to opportunities for personal growth, like education, vocational training. It also means connections to mentors, classes in life skills, chances for enrichment and recreation, affordable housing, and mental health services that promote healing. None of us can do this alone. Partnerships with and between child-serving agencies, nonprofits, and community-based organizations are absolutely critical.

OJJDP is tremendously grateful to our partners, CJJ, NJJN, and so many others for your tireless devotion to reform and equity and for your ongoing collaborations with us. Today, as we kick off YJAM 2023, I encourage each of us to commit to strengthening existing partnerships and to pursuing new ones. We are stronger together. We make each other stronger.

I'm going to pass the microphone now so you can hear from NJJN and CJJ their work to protect and support young people, and the activities and resources they've developed for YJAM. Thank you again for joining us today for this kickoff webinar. I look forward to seeing and learning from you throughout October and in the months to come. Now, we'll hear from our partners from the National Juvenile Justice Network and the Coalition for Juvenile Justice.

TRACEY TUCKER: Thank you, Administrator Ryan and OJJDP staff for including us in this kickoff webinar for Youth Justice Action Month. I'm Tracey Tucker, Executive Director with the National Juvenile Justice Network, and joining me is Alani Rouse, our Youth Program Organizer.

The National Juvenile Justice Network is an anti-racist movement building organization made up of individuals and state-based advocacy organizations in 52 states working to

disrupt and dismantle harmful youth legal systems. We're happy to be here with you today to discuss the roundtable event that we held last year and discuss the toolkit that we created this year to encourage advocates, organizations, and state advisory groups to replicate roundtables at the state and local levels. Links to the YJAM toolkit, how to create youth center policy roundtables, as well as a recording of a webinar we held on the toolkit last month, will be dropped into the chat.

This year's theme is a continuation of last year's theme of Justice Is blank, we fill in the blank. We did this because we are continuing this theme because we really want to underscore the importance of including youth voices in policy decisions. So, last year, in partnership with the Coalition for Juvenile Justice, we held youth-led roundtable discussions with Administrator Ryan and the Federal Coordinating Council also for Youth Justice Action Month. And so each of our organizations work together to identify young people throughout our network and held a series of prep sessions to discuss their visions of youth justice, to identify court areas where they'd like to see change implemented and work with them to create recommendations that were presented to Administrator Ryan and the leadership team.

What we found—and what you'll find—is that recommendations can cover a broad range of topics. For example, CJJ's Emerging Leaders Committee focused on four key priorities—their recommendations: ensuring equity in the justice system; reducing the number of young people who become involved with the justice system; ensuring that young people who come into contact with the system receive effective rehabilitative services; and providing reentry support for young people who are returning to their communities.

NJJN's young justice leaders develop recommendations that fell into themes around equity, opportunity, restoration, prevention, and abolition, with specific recommendations, including mentors, investment in school support, decriminalizing status offenses, and shifting investments from prison to residential facilities to community-based programming.

At this time, I'd like to invite Alani to come in and to speak about what the process looks like for her and to discuss why it's important to have youth not only at the table but leading these discussions.

ALANI ROUSE: Hi, all. My name is Alani Rouse. I am the Youth Organizing Manager at NJJN and I am happy to be here and talk to you all about my experience a little bit. Tracey, did you want me to just, I guess, talk. I didn't have a...

TRACEY TUCKER: Yeah, yeah. Tell us about what the experience was like for you. Why was it important that you got involved and wanted to have your voice heard?

ALANI ROUSE: So, me deciding to be involved in advocacy was, honestly—I like to describe it as part of my active healing, and it really helped me to be able to consciously make better decisions. I was in and out of mental health facilities and just running into all these various things with the justice system when I was a teenager. And when I was given the opportunity to join a cohort, when I was 17, it really helped me to stop, but also really be conscious of the legislation that made it possible for all the pushout that I was encountering to take place. And from that point on, I learned how to advocate for myself. I learned how to host roundtable discussions and events with elected officials, and I'm now here as the Youth Organizing Manager with NJJN, which is one of the organizations that was integral in that process for me, so it's a full circle moment. When I'm not doing that, I'm at home and I help run a teen center, a [INDISTINCT] teen center in my city, and that also helps to give kids a more holistic way to express themselves and their experiences, rather than resorting to things that land them in the justice system continuously.

And so I just want to give young people the space to be themselves, to create, but also to have a happier and a healthier way to talk about their stories. A lot of times it can be almost traumatizing to tell the story of the things that have happened to you and your experience inside. And so whether it be poetry, music, painting, I like, too, storytelling as a medium to facilitate healing, but also conversation for young people and myself.

TRACEY TUCKER: Thanks, Alani. Is there anything that you have to offer to folks who are looking to organize these types of roundtables with young people? Any tips or advice that you'd give to them?

ALANI ROUSE: A couple of tips that I would give people trying to organize events with young people would be to be very open and just honest about what it is that you want from young people. You don't have to try to swindle young people or convince them to show up as themselves, but also give them room to be their whole selves. Sometimes I know there have been moments and opportunities where I have felt uncomfortable because I didn't feel like my whole self was welcome. And so when you make it known to them that all of them is welcome, they can come in whatever they want to, they can wear whatever they want to, they can look how they want to, that makes them a lot happier to show up.

Feeding them is also nice. It takes energy to get up and to talk to—be around other humans. And I think just not being scared to just go everywhere and ask. There are literally children everywhere. If you think there are no young people in certain places, you're probably wrong. And so just not being afraid to ask young people to show up. And it

might take a little while, you might have to nudge, you might have to convince them a little bit, but once they know that you care for them, it will be a worthwhile experience, and you'll probably create all these different connections, and you might be responsible for helping to facilitate somebody's genius. So, I think the biggest things were just that I felt really welcome everywhere I was. I had autonomy, which is not something that I had a lot, especially as a minor, and I think that I really did understand that my voice was valued wherever I went, so.

TRACEY TUCKER: Thank you, Alani. Thank you for sharing your experience with us. I just had a few additional insights from our toolkit that we found from both working with the young people and with our toolkit this past year. So, one of the things we discovered is that follow-up is really important with young people, so if you're planning to host one of these roundtables, please ensure that there's follow-up with young people involved [INDISTINCT] let them know how it is that you're using their recommendations and their feedback. Last year, we were able to have a follow-up call with Administrator Ryan, where she was able to discuss with young people her plans or incorporate their feedback into OJJDP's upcoming publications and their work.

It was also important for us to hold prep sessions with young people, just to talk to them, to get their vision, their ideas, but also to help develop their comfort levels, and make sure that they were okay. We've had practice sessions, who's going to go next, who's going to do this, who's going to present on what, which is also really important for us. NJJN and CJJ also partnered in this effort, and so if it's something that you're looking to do at the state and local level, please consider partnering with other organizations that are working with young people in your area, and compensating people. Alani said food was good, but compensating young people for their time and their expertise is always welcome. Alani, is there anything additional you'd like to add before we turn it over to Myla with CJJ?

ALANI ROUSE: I think another thing that wasn't mentioned but might have been inherent is childcare. A lot of young people also double as parents, so I think when you provide childcare or you provide childcare stipends that lets them know that you not only see them as young people, but you recognize them as caregivers, which is really, really important. And even outside of maybe having children, they might be an older sibling caring for their younger siblings. And so just really understanding the full breadth of their identity as a person and the various roles that they play is particularly important.

And something else that I just thought of was being ethical in asking about somebody's experience. I know sometimes when I've worked with people and they were justice-involved people, the first thing that they think to do is to just go look up people's records, so being very sensitive about things like that and making sure that even with things such

as that, though it is public record, that you are being respectful to the people and not doing things like that without consent. And, yeah, I think that's about it, so taking the babies into consideration and taking people's personal past into consideration.

TRACEY TUCKER: Thank you. Thank you, Alani, for those key insights. And so, with that, up next is going to be a video from Myla Roundy, who is an Emerging Leader with the Coalition for Juvenile Justice who will discuss her experience and remind us again why it's important to have youth voices leading this conversation. Thank you.

DARYL FOX: Great. Thank you, Tracy, thank you, Alani. And as I prep the video to share with the audience, I just want to let the audience know that the audio may be a little slight, so if you do have trouble hearing, you can select the media viewer panel and get the closed captioning. There's also a CC button at the bottom left side of the Webex screen that can help follow along if you want. And Alani, I just want to pass along that [INDISTINCT] did share. Thank you for your courage in sharing, so I definitely want to pass that along to you. Let me proceed to the presentation here. So without further ado, I will go ahead and start sharing the video remarks from Myla Roundy with CJJ and Howard University.

MYLA ROUNDY: Hello, my name is Myla Simone Roundy. I am from Aurora, Illinois, and I am currently a freshman journalism major at Howard University in Washington, DC. Although I am personally not a person with any lived experience within the juvenile justice system, as a Black individual living in the United States, the carceral system has always impacted my livelihood. I have seen many people close to me and far from all age groups have a direct experience with the system, and one of my goals in life is to end some of the recurring practices that hinder the lives of minority groups.

Reasons such as these are why I do work—why I do advocacy work, like working with the Coalition for Juvenile Justice's Emerging Leaders Committee. I remember when I was younger and would visit my family in Iowa, certain family members that used to be around were not anymore. And I would talk to my mom about it, and she explained it to me that they were away and would come back, but I never truly grasped the idea of what she meant until I was older. Seeing how much incarceration has disrupted my own family dynamics is why topics such as reducing recidivism rates and providing equitable access to opportunities are so important to me and —help guide how I go about planning my future.

My journey of advocacy work started back in my sophomore year of high school, when I joined my school's Student Equity Advisory Council. This opened up numerous opportunities, including becoming a member of CJJ's ELC. When I was a sophomore, I

started off by talking to my county's juvenile justice council, which then led to a discussion with the statewide Illinois Juvenile Justice Council. The purpose of both of these discussions was for me to give tips on how to properly work with students of color, specifically pertaining to the police officers and school resource officers. And I believe that this was a great stepping stone for me because not only was I able to reflect on my own experiences and traumas, but I had also had the opportunity to conduct a survey, and received information from a group of students that validated some of my own thoughts, and truly helped me see that there was indeed a need for some change.

From there, I helped facilitate two equity cafes for community members, and then I went to an elementary school where we started the discussion of being allies to marginalized groups. I have also organized a lunch-and-learn in partnership with the Kane County Juvenile Justice Council for high schoolers, where we brought in different officials who worked on the council, and just gave information and background on how the system impacts everyone whether you are in it or you're not.

On a more broad spectrum, I have had the opportunity to be a student election judge with my county's clerk's office. I was a speaker at the Large Unit District Association Conference representing my high school; I was a recipient of the City of Aurora's Service Above Self MLK Youth Leadership Award; and I was also a panelist for an event put on by Parents Advocating for the Greater Enrichment of Students, also known as PAGES, in which the topic of discussion was discipline in our schools averting the pipeline.

Although I was never the "expert" in these situations, being in these spaces and others alike has allowed me to learn and grow. Learning to listen and advocate for others in spaces where they're not typically welcomed has not only made me a more well-rounded person but it has also given me more confidence in advocating for myself, my own needs, and desires.

The previous opportunities that I just mentioned were all separate from the ELC. So, to give background on that, I found out about the ELC because of the sponsor of the Student Equity Advisory Council. She shared the opportunity with me, and at first I was a little hesitant. It took me a few months to apply after I had found out because I did not know what I was getting myself into. I didn't think I would be a good fit because I don't have any lived experience, and this would be my first huge stepping stone into the realm. But two years later, I am still here and I am very glad that I went for it. With them, the ELC, I have been able to take part in multiple discussions and reach audiences that I never thought would have been of access to me.

Last year, through the ELC, I was able to speak at a policy roundtable during Youth Justice Action Month, where I spoke on equity and gave some policy recommendations. So the following is a sum of what I said last year.

In recent history within education politics and social justice, the word equity has been mentioned a lot more, with a lot of the rules, restrictions, and policies in place are still upon the foundation of what is supposed to be equality. Within their individual rights, both are great, both are necessary for proper change. But the distinction between the two needs to be made. Equity can be defined and acknowledged as addressing individual, personalized needs. This is not the same as looking at someone who is perceived to be in the same or similar situation as another person, and then basing all action steps off of a completely different person with varied background and history. That would, in a sense, be equality, but even that is a stretch. To ensure equity—a fundamental principle in all things youth justice—there needs to be an emphasis on authority figures, but there also needs to be a separate emphasis on youth. Oftentimes, it seems as if authorities and youth who are involved in the same areas are defaulted into the same category, which is not beneficial to anyone. For any figure whose line of work even remotely touches the juvenile justice system—for example, police officers, educators, elected officials, and mental health professionals—they must go through diversity and racial equity training, with an emphasis on cognitive bias so that they know how to implement and practice equity in any interaction.

Just to reiterate, this is something that these individuals should definitely go through. We need it so that we could have equity. We could have a well-rounded system, but then it's not the case in most situations, most locations.

Many individuals think that they are racially aware and fluent in equity literacy just by being in the different spaces that they occupy, but unless they have their own lived experiences and have been on both sides of the table, then how can they even know for sure that what they are doing is equitable? Because there's no active participation in specific training unless they truly take the time and have the desire to want to learn and better themselves so that they can help better others.

In reference to youth, although important, the conversation is not necessary about them encouraging equity for others or themselves, but rather having access to equitable opportunities. And an example that I can think of that is very minimum, base level, is a simple ID card. At my former high school, specifically, but also others around in my area, our school IDs had the suicide hotline number on the back because mental health of students was of the utmost importance, it was actively prioritized every day. Everyone must be educated on their rights starting from a young age, but especially in areas that

are overpoliced, have high youth arrest rates, and in schools that use federal funding to pay school law enforcement, the importance of basic legal knowledge drastically increases.

Now, not all educational institutions have the ability to dedicate specific classes towards the rights of the people, or even hold a schoolwide assembly, but most can put up posters, and many already hand out IDs. A school photo ID card with Miranda rights on the back—that only solves the problem of someone not knowing what to do or say in an altercation with the police, but it also addresses the issue of specifically students of color often being criminalized instantaneously, because they now have physical proof that they are a minor, they are a child, they are enrolled in school, and therefore should be treated as such. Equity is so fundamental to this kind of work because for the longest time, the juvenile justice system has simply grouped every person into this lump sum of nothing, and it has been time to properly address and prioritize the needs of every individual.

One of the audience members of this roundtable was Administrator Liz Ryan. And this summer, I had the great pleasure of working with her directly at the CJJ 2023 Youth Summit, which was entitled, "Empowering, Enriching, and Inspiring Youth: Making Policy Personal."

During the youth summit, which was a major success, we wanted to give the audience the chance to ask questions, speak their truth, and interact with Administrator Ryan, because opportunities like this one are few and far between for many. During the session, Administrator Ryan not only spoke on the things she has done, but also the things she is doing and plans to do. What made the youth summit so successful this year was that there was an open dialogue from all individuals—both presenters and the audience. It did not matter what walk of life a person came from—if someone had something to say, they were heard and their information was absorbed.

As a final recap to go over everything said in this space today, Youth Justice Action Month is the time to get involved. Coming from a person who did not think they had a valuable voice in the space originally, but then now learning how I can become a proper ally is what has made my journey so profound and fulfilling. Whether you think this is your space or not, I personally would encourage everyone to get involved, because any steps towards change is much needed progress. Thank you.

DARYL FOX: Thank you, Myla, for those comments and for that insight, very powerful. At this time, I'd like to reintroduce OJJDP Administrator Liz Ryan for some closing remarks as we wrap up today.

LIZ RYAN: As we close, I'd like to thank Tracey, Alani, and Myla for participating in today's webinar, and thank all of you for joining us for one of many activities we have planned for Youth Justice Action Month. To learn more about upcoming YJAM activities, please visit our website at ojjdp.ojp.gov. Thank you. And that concludes the webinar. See you around.