



# Respect Youth Stories

A Toolkit for Advocates to  
Ethically Engage in Youth  
Justice Storytelling

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Citizens  
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# Executive Summary

Using stories to elevate the human impact of unjust systems is a common element of advocacy work. Stories show us the faces behind statistics and help us understand how systems operate and impact young people's lives. Organizations working to transform youth justice frequently invite young people to share their stories for general advocacy purposes or during special campaigns. Young people giving first-hand accounts of their experiences often prove to be the most powerful lever for change.

It is critically important to establish an ethical approach to advocacy storytelling so that young people are not exploited or re-harmed in the process of sharing their experiences. This is especially true when dealing with youth and young adults who carry trauma from the systems we are working to change.

Here is how young people want advocacy organizations to ethically engage in youth justice storytelling:

- 1 Be clear about your intentions and maintain transparency throughout the process of gathering and sharing young people's stories.
- 2 Ensure youth have agency in the storytelling process.
- 3 Understand and inform young people of the risks and benefits of sharing their stories, particularly if they have a pending legal case.
- 4 When facilitating an interview with the press, ensure youth are fully informed and help them prepare to share their story.
- 5 When asking young people to share their story as part of an advocacy campaign, build a relationship before asking them to share their story, and stay connected with them after the project is complete.
- 6 Ensure that young people feel seen, heard and respected.
- 7 Develop ongoing, professional relationships with youth

# Introduction and Purpose

## A Toolkit for Advocates to Ethically Engage in Youth Justice Storytelling

To provide insight from young people on ways that advocates can ethically invite them to share their stories, the National Juvenile Justice Network (NJJN) and its member organization, Massachusetts-based Citizens for Juvenile Justice (CfJJ), partnered to create the following toolkit. **Our primary aim in creating this toolkit is to assist advocacy organizations in establishing ethical and youth-informed practices for facilitating young people sharing their stories in public, including through the press, legislative testimony, digital media, publications, or panel discussions.** We also hope reading this toolkit helps young people understand their right to establish boundaries while sharing their experiences in public.

The toolkit was developed in collaboration with youth who have been affected in some way by the criminal legal system, the youth legal system, or the other youth-impacting systems. Information for the toolkit was gathered during two focus groups and one interview where participants answered open-ended questions, such as:

- What would make youth feel comfortable in telling their stories?
- What should youth know about an advocacy organization before telling their story?
- How should advocacy organizations prepare young people to talk to the media or policy-makers about their story and how should they be supported after their story is told?
- How can advocacy organizations avoid exploiting young people's stories and ensure they have agency throughout the process?

Nine youth advocates, who were referred to NJJN and CfJJ by members of the NJJN Network, provided oversight and critical feedback during each step of the toolkit development, including during the creation of focus group questions, creating the toolkit outline, and reviewing the final draft. The two focus groups and one interview were also conducted by members of the review committee.

# Steps Advocacy Organizations Must Take to Ethically Engage in Youth Justice Storytelling

## 1. Be clear about your intentions and maintain transparency throughout the process of gathering and sharing young people's stories.

The first step organizations can take when ethically sharing youth stories is to be clear about the process with young people. Let them know from beginning to end what will happen, whom they will speak with, and how their stories will be used. Also, be clear about your organization's agenda. Are their stories part of a specific advocacy campaign? Do you intend to share their story with the press? Are you asking them to talk with reporters or testify in front of a legislative body? Do you expect to use their story in a subsequent action or for fundraising purposes? Did you disclose to the youth the potential uses of their story beyond the initial action? Set the expectations so that young people know exactly what they are getting into and how far-reaching their story may be shared.

To maintain a clear and transparent process, organizations can:

- Clearly state the mission, goals, and objectives of your organization and/or the specific campaign you are working on.
- Let young people know why you've reached out to them. If you've heard their story before or a partner organization referred them to you, state that and be clear with why you think they'd be a good fit to share their experience.
- Explain exactly how the young person's story will be used. Will their voice be used on a podcast? Quotes on social media? Graphics on Instagram? A full article on your blog? Always offer them the opportunity to say yes or no to having their story shared on a specific platform.

## 2. Ensure youth have agency in the storytelling process.

Young people should always feel empowered within the storytelling process. They own their story, and organizations should go out of their way to make them feel comfortable by setting boundaries with what information gets shared. Here are some ways to ensure youth have agency in how, when, and where their stories are told:

- Offer to provide anonymity. Some young people may not want their names attached to an article or social media post, while others may want to have their names displayed publicly. Never assume and always offer to maintain privacy if the young person would feel more comfortable.
- If you are interviewing a young person or connecting them to a reporter, ensure that the young person knows that they can decline to answer any question that is asked. Remind the young person that they have a choice in what they would like to share or keep private.
- Give young people access to the final product before it is made public. This is easier if you are writing a story in-house, versus working with an outside reporter.

# Steps Advocacy Organizations Must Take to Ethically Engage in Youth Justice Storytelling

- If you are collecting the story yourself, give ample time for the young person to approve and offer edits or feedback. Let them know that they can redact anything if they are uncomfortable with what they previously shared.
- If you are working with a reporter for a press article, ask the reporter ahead of time if they are willing to let you see the final product before it is published. You can also ask them to send the specific quotes they plan to use so that the young person can make sure the quotes are accurate. If a reporter agrees to show the article or quotes, but refuses to take any edits, that information may still prove valuable so that you can have a heads up on what the story will entail.
- Consider offering a fully informed consent document that outlines the storytelling process for the young person and gives them guidelines that they can review and refer to if they have questions.

## **3. Understand and inform young people of the risks and benefits of sharing their stories, particularly if they have a pending legal case.**

- There are considerable risks when engaging youth with pending cases in public storytelling. If a young person wants to share their story while still involved in the system, advocates should inform youth and their families of the associated risks of public statements on their legal case. Additionally, advocates must coordinate directly with the young person's attorney at every junction.
- Clarify when a campaign's goals will directly benefit the young person and when the objective is to prevent harm for the next young person in a similar situation. Young people often show enthusiasm for sharing their stories to help others avoid similar situations as theirs. However, it is perfectly okay if they decide to pull back if there is no direct benefit to their current situation. Remember, the emotional costs of speaking out publicly are significant, sometimes too great, without the direct benefit.
- Similarly, a young person might agree to share their experience without realizing how long their story will exist in the public domain. Stories in the digital realm last forever. It's important to consider how sharing their story could impact a young person's future employment, academic pursuits, or social relationships. Have a critical conversation about what it would mean to have their story exist in the public domain for an indeterminate time and how that might affect them emotionally - now or in the future.

# Steps Advocacy Organizations Must Take to Ethically Engage in Youth Justice Storytelling

## 4. When facilitating an interview with the press, ensure youth are fully informed and help them prepare to share their story.

If and when a young person decides to share their story with the press, advocacy organizations should prepare them prior to any interviews, as well as support them after their story has been told. Here are some ways to help prepare and support young people:

- Act as an advocate for the young person when facilitating an interview with the media. Offer to meet with the young person prior to a reporter interviewing them and sit on the call with them during the interview if it would make the young person more comfortable.
- Ask the young person if they would like to talk to the reporter before the actual interview. Knowing the reporter beforehand may help them feel more comfortable and empowered to ask questions or set boundaries.
- If there is a fact-checking process, explain to young people what that process entails before they share their story.
- Ask the reporter what questions will be asked. If they won't give specific questions, ask for guiding discussion topics and offer to help the young person brainstorm and fine-tune their responses. Any information shared by young people in the brainstorming process is considered confidential and should not be used by organizations.
- Consider peer preparation with other young people who regularly work with your organization and have media training. Working with a peer may make a young person feel comfortable preparing for a media interview.

# Steps Advocacy Organizations Must Take to Ethically Engage in Youth Justice Storytelling

## 5. When asking young people to share their story as part of an advocacy campaign, build a relationship before asking them to share their story, and stay connected with them after the project is complete.

Young people want to know that an advocacy organization cares about them – not just their story. Hopefully you already have, or have started to build a relationship with the young people before you ask them to share their experience with you, and continue to support them after their story is made public.

- Meet with youth prior to asking them to divulge personal information about themselves. Get to know them and allow them to ask any questions they have about the project or organization.
- Ask the young person to complete an informed consent form (see the Tools and Checklists section on page 10 for a template), and require a parent or legal guardian to sign the form if the young person is under 18 years of age.
- Check in with them after your campaign. Ask them how they felt about it, what kind of responses they have gotten, if they learned something they wish they had known. Once you've learned a little about their experience, you may have a sense of what support they may need. Offer to connect them with resources related to school, housing, financial support, jobs or internships, mental health or other helpful services, or to advocates who can assist them with any of these needs.
- Maintain contact and include them as an ongoing part of your community.



Photo by Keira Burton from Pexels

# Steps Advocacy Organizations Must Take to Ethically Engage in Youth Justice Storytelling

## 6. Ensure that young people feel seen, heard and respected.

Young people would like advocacy organizations to view their stories as lived experiences rather than statistics or business transactions. Advocacy organizations should be intentional about making sure young people feel seen, heard and respected. When getting to know a young person's story:

- Take a conversational approach to hearing their experience. Organize the interview as a conversation rather than conducting a question and answer style interview. The guiding discussion questions should be unbiased, open-ended, and allow space for young people to elaborate.
- Talk to the young person individually rather than in a group setting to create a space that is more comfortable for them. Youth may feel uncomfortable sharing their experiences alongside other young people they do not know.
- Be mindful of verbal and nonverbal communications during the conversation (e.g. body language and eye gaze). This includes your own verbal and nonverbal communications as well as the young person's.
- Avoid assuming that all young people share the same experiences and can speak to another young person's experiences. Even if two young people are similar across ages, geographic locations, gender identities or racial and ethnic groups, their lived experiences will vary.

**"I just told them like the whole situation that I went through recently and instead of them like, you know, talking about what I've been through, it was more or less like they were trying to compare me to statistics... If that makes sense. It was just weird. That was my first time and I didn't know what to expect at the same time, but yeah, definitely felt a little weird."**



# Steps Advocacy Organizations Must Take to Ethically Engage in Youth Justice Storytelling

## 7. Develop ongoing, professional relationships with youth.

Advocacy organizations should prioritize building ongoing, professional relationships with youth. Young people are experts in their own experiences and should be treated as such.

- When reaching out to young people, advocacy organizations should contact young people through email or phone rather than through their personal social media accounts.
- Incorporate young people in the decision-making processes of your ongoing work - before, during, and after they have helped your advocacy by sharing their stories.
- Stipend young people for their time, and clearly state how and when young people will be paid. Remind them throughout the process that they will be paid so that they don't have to ask.
  - In addition, advocacy organizations can get creative and provide gift cards or other opportunities for further involvement with the organization. For more tips on ways to stipend youth, see Youth M.O.V.E. National's #Thing2consider one-pager on page 12.
- Ensure all processes are scheduled around the young person's availability. Make sure to ask the young person what day and time works best for them before scheduling any interviews or follow-up events. Advocacy organizations should also ask young people what their preferred phone number or email address is.

**"I'd be more likely to respond to maybe an email or something like that or to respond to an organization that contacted me through an organization that I'm already in, such as this, than I would be to maybe respond to like an Instagram DM or like reaching out through social media, anything like that. I think it's just a matter of professionalism perhaps."**

# Tools and Checklist

## What should be included in an informed consent form?

- Project description
- Consent form language must be at 8th grade level and not rely on legalese
- Goals of the project or campaign
- Preliminary timeline
- How young person's information will be collected and used
- Any third party software (e.g. video or file-sharing software) that will be used to collect a young person's information and links to the software company's privacy policies
- Information on who will staff the project and what steps will be taken to ensure young person's privacy and safety while sharing their story internally within your organization or externally to the public
- Include your organization's non-discrimination and/or non-harassment statement to ensure young person's safety
- Photo/video release statements, including where any media images will appear, for how long their images may be used and steps young people can take to redact their image use
- Contact information
- Signature line for a young person or parent/guardian/foster parent to authorize their consent

## Keep the relationship going: What to do after you've shared the young person's story in your campaign.

- Hold a debriefing session - have a list of questions to go over
- Organize a youth community healing circle just to let young people get together and destress from whatever is going on in their lives. To avoid retraumatizing a young person or breaking their trust, do not share any information outside of the healing circle.
- Invite the young people you've worked with to future trainings that can benefit them - like advocacy or communications training
- Invite them to take on a leadership role in the planning and execution of future projects
- Follow up with young people about additional educational or storytelling opportunities

# Tools and Checklist

## Owning Your Story Checklist for Youth

Lived experiences have the power to reduce stigmas and to inform and educate others. However, the decision to share your story is a personal choice - one that should never be forced upon you for any reason. This storytelling checklist serves as a reference guide to help you own and share your story in a way that respects your boundaries. Before you decide whether or not to share your story, here are some things to consider:

### How would I like to self-identify?

- You have the decision to determine how you would like to self-identify. Do you want to share your full name, first name only or a made-up name? Do you want to share your racial and ethnic identity? Do you want to share your gender identity? Do you want to share additional details about your identity?

### Am I ready to share?

- Ask yourself if you are ready to share your story with others. If you don't feel ready or comfortable doing so, you don't have to. Even if you have shared your story publicly before, you have the right to say no.

### How do I share my story from my perspective?

- You are the expert of your own lived experiences. If you decide to share your story, be yourself and share from your viewpoint. You are not obligated to speak for anyone but yourself.

### What would I like to share?

- There may be aspects of your story that you don't feel comfortable sharing with others. If there are details you would like to keep private, it may be helpful for you to consider what details are most helpful to the campaign you are informing. What is the purpose of sharing my story? How will my story be used? Who is my audience?

### Who will see my story?

- You may want to consider the exposure that the story will bring to you. Once information is shared and accessible by the public, there is no going back and it can be difficult to contain. This is in no way to discourage you from sharing your story. It is to help you think about what feels right to you.

### Who can I call if I need support after sharing my story?

- Sharing your story may be an emotional experience. In addition to healing circles organized by the youth organization working with you, it may be helpful to let a trusted parent or guardian, friend, counselor or teacher know that you plan to share your story. That way, they can be there for you before and afterwards, if needed.

# Additional Resources

## [Tips for Interviewing Victims of Tragedy, Witnesses, and Survivors](#)

Dart Center for Journalism & Trauma (2021)

## [Conducting Interviews With Kids: Do's and Don'ts](#)

Columbia Journalism Review (2018)

## [How to Write a Commentary](#)

YR Media (2018)

## [The Art of the Interview](#)

YR Media (2018)

## [Tips for Stipending Youth and Young Adults](#)

Youth M.O.V.E National (2020)

## [Owning Your Story for People Involved in Foster Care](#)

Foster Care Alumni of America (2014)

# About

## National Juvenile Justice Network

The National Juvenile Justice Network leads a membership community of 60 state-based organizations and numerous individuals across 42 states and D.C. We all seek to shrink our youth justice systems and transform the remainder into systems that treat youth and families with dignity and humanity. Our work is premised on the fundamental understanding that our youth justice systems are inextricably bound with the systemic and structural racism that defines our society; as such we seek to change policy and practice through an anti-racist lens by building power with those who are most negatively affected by our justice systems, including young people, their families and all people of color. We also recognize that other vulnerable populations - including LGBTQIA+, those with disabilities and mental illness, girls and immigrants - are disparately and negatively impacted by our justice systems, and thus we also seek to center their concerns in our policy change work.

## Citizens for Juvenile Justice

Citizens for Juvenile Justice (CfJJ) advocates for statewide systemic reform to achieve equitable youth justice. For the last 27 years, we have been the only independent, non-profit, statewide organization working exclusively to improve juvenile justice, and other youth serving systems, in Massachusetts. We advocate, build coalitions, conduct research, and educate the public on important juvenile justice issues. We believe that both children and youth in the system and public safety are best served by fair and effective systems that recognize the ways children are different from adults, that focus primarily on their rehabilitation and that promote healthy development so they can grow up to live as responsible and productive adults in our communities.

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