

MEDIA ADVISORY

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Ohio Department of Youth Services builds on Vera project to increase family engagement and improve outcomes for incarcerated youth

NEW YORK — “**Families as Partners: Supporting Incarcerated Youth in Ohio,**” a research brief recently released by the Family Justice Program at the Vera Institute of Justice, reports on the first year of a three-year joint project between Vera and the Ohio Department of Youth Services (DYS). The research shows that improving family connections to youth in the juvenile justice system is producing positive results for the practitioners and young people in the facilities where the work has been piloted. In line with these findings, DHS is committed to expanding its family-oriented approach.

Vera staff trained personnel in DHS facilities to use the Juvenile Relational Inquiry Tool (JRIT)—a series of questions inviting young people to talk about family members who can motivate them positively when they return to the community—and helped DHS staff integrate a family-centered approach into their work with youth. Through interviews and surveys with DHS staff and placed youth and their families, Vera staff found that the JRIT improved staff and youth perspectives about one another and fostered a climate in which youth and family members could stay connected.

“Our research found that youth who are themselves parents wanted more contact with their children,” said Ryan Shanahan, a senior program associate at Vera. “DYS responded by adding a parenting class to increase the connections youth who are parents have with their children.”

Building on the Vera pilot, DHS is enhancing visitation policies to enhance opportunities to visit youth in custody. DHS has also been using computers and wireless technology to allow youth to visit family members via the internet and to connect youth with parole officers before they are released from facilities.

The agency is using performance-based standards to measure facility staff’s ability to involve families in youth’s treatment. “We are eager to receive feedback from families on our efforts to better partner with them, and we invite families to complete an anonymous survey on our website at www.dys.ohio.gov,” said DHS Director Harvey Reed. “Helping our young people takes all of us working together.”

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