

**Kansas Juvenile Justice Workgroup  
Parents and Family Members Roundtables Executive Summary  
Olathe, Kansas  
October 12, 2015**

On October 12, 2015, the Kansas Juvenile Justice Workgroup held a roundtable discussion about juvenile justice in Olathe, Kansas with parents and family members of youth found to be juvenile offenders or Children in Need of Care—Non-Abuse and Neglect (CINC-NAN). The discussion was facilitated by Senator Greg Smith, co-chair of the Workgroup.

➤ ***Strengths of the Juvenile Justice System:***

- **Youth can be successful if they connect with a mentor or other positive role model:** Parents reported that youth respond to connecting with adults in the community who are consistent, positive role models. At least one parent said that she had attempted to volunteer as a mentor but had been told there is a policy against allowing individuals who have been involved with the juvenile justice system from working as mentors. Parents felt this policy was counterproductive, as those with experience dealing with the system could have greater insights for court-involved youth than other individuals.
- **Many individuals who work in the juvenile justice system have good intentions:** Parents reported that many of the people who work in juvenile justice are well-intentioned but are constrained by the system and the roles they are forced to play within it. As one parent stated, “I think most of the people have a good heart and want to know what’s right.”
- **Recent Juvenile Detention Alternatives Initiative (JDAI) work has led to positive changes:** One parent stated that recent changes to the juvenile justice system in Johnson County had led to improvements, including a greater number of alternatives to detention.

➤ ***Areas in Need of Improvement:***

- **Communication with parents and families is extremely poor:** Parents reported that the juvenile justice system regularly failed to provide basic information about their child’s legal status and treatment progress at every stage of the process. Parents stated that there is little or no communication between group home facilities and families planning for a youth’s release. One mother said she received a call without warning in which she was informed her son would return home in two days. She was forced to cancel a planned family trip, but her son ultimately did not return home on that day as she had been told he would. Another parent said of her son, “We have no idea when he will be home. He’s at a boys home. There’s no plan. There’s no discussion of coming home.” Another parent stated that although his son’s probation officer had initially engaged frequently with them about his son’s case, the officer stopped communicating information once the son turned 18 due to real or perceived legal prohibitions.
- **Families feel it is extremely difficult to get their children out of the juvenile justice system:** Parents expressed a sense of futility in their attempts to assist their children in successfully completing the requirements of the juvenile justice system. They reported that minor violations often push youth further into the system. Parents stated that court requirements are not clearly communicated to them and that youth are regularly stepped back from completion of group home programs and found in violation of probation requirements for minor misconduct. Parents reported that group homes require youth to complete level-based programs but regularly “reset

the clock” on youth for minor behaviors. One parent noted that his son was about to be released from a group home when he brought a cell phone to the facility after a home visit and was then transferred to another facility. At that facility, the youth worked his back up to the highest level of the program and was again nearing release when he received a curfew violation and returned to level one. The father stated that his son “got into a spiral and got in the system, and we can’t get him out and no one can get him out.” Another mother stated that her son had been returned to the first level of a residential group home program after he lost his job when the company he worked for downsized its workforce.

- **Low-level juvenile offenders and CINC youth are mixed in facilities with serious youth:** Parents stated that youth in residential facilities for low-level offenses or as a Child in Need of Care are mixed with a population of more serious offenders. Family members reported that their children often felt at risk of assault from older youth. A mother stated that her son, who was placed in a group home for a probation violation, had received permanent eye damage after another boy assaulted him in a facility. Family members also reported that low-level youth meet more serious offenders in facilities and learn criminal behaviors there. One father said of his son, “We go out with him, and he says, ‘oh, I met that kid at the Juvenile Detention Center or at the group home facility.’”
- **Lack of screening assessments and resources at the front end of the system:** Parents reported that there is a lack of resources and treatment assessments on the front end of the system. Youth did not receive adequate screenings at intake, and no plan is developed for directing resources for those youth. Parents stated that resources are only available once a youth moves through to the back end of the system, usually in an out-of-home placement. A father stated that the court ordered her child receive treatment but the burden to find and pay for those services was placed upon her. “They never had a plan for his treatment,” he said. “We had to make the plan.”
- **The juvenile justice system places a severe financial burden on parents:** Parents stated that significant costs imposed upon their children through the juvenile justice system can pose a severe financial burden on their lives. A couple stated that their sons’ time in the juvenile justice system for a low-level offense had resulted in “tens of thousands of dollars” in debt to the court. Several family members reported that they paid hundreds of dollars in house arrest costs to keep their children out of detention facilities. Those parents reported that GPS monitoring put in place as part of house arrest also restricted their mobility, as they felt had to prevent their children from leaving the home. One mother reported that this contributed to her losing her job. Another parent stated that she spent significant time and money to expunge her son’s record and keep him from having to register as a sexual predator. He was 14 or 15 when the offense occurred. She suggested that at the very least there should be a slide fee scale for fees and for court-ordered therapy.
- **Lack of services for youth on probation:** Family members stated that there were few or no resources to assist parents in paying for services required by the court. One parent stated that while services may be available for CINC youth subject to serious abuse or neglect and for youth with serious mental disturbances, he had found that there were none for youth “in the middle” who had less severe substance abuse or mental health needs. The father said, “we had to try to find community resources to match the probation conditions, and those things weren’t in place to be able to find any kind of support.”

➤ **How the Parts of the System Interact:**

- **Different parts of the juvenile justice system do not communicate:** Parents reported that each part of the system that they interacted with did not communicate with the others. As one parent stated, “before we ended up in the back end [of the juvenile justice system], everything on front from the detention center to the school to the police to the [Juvenile Intake and Assessment Center], they were all just a bunch of silos.”

➤ **Other:**

- **Parents are required to pay heavy child support costs:** Parents stated that the child support they pay once a youth enters state custody is significant. One parent reported that her family had paid \$250,000 in child support to the state while her son was in the system. This parent expressed frustration that, in her words, child support goes to the State General Fund and to Department for Children and Families. Another parent stated that in addition to child support she paid her deceased husband’s Social Security, restitution, legal fees, and any other costs her son had incurred before he turned 18. A failure to pay these fees can impact a parents’ credit rating negatively, family members report.
- **Parents are unsure of their rights once a youth returns home after turning 18:** Some parents stated that were unsure of their rights once their children return home from custody after the age of 18.

➤ **Notable Quotes:**

- **On the lack of set timeframes for supervision and incarceration:** “It’s all pretty open ended. No timeframes. If it was a non-physical [offense such as] marijuana, that kid could be in it forever compared to people who are physically aggressive and all that.”
- **On the need for greater community-based support and mentoring:** “When I was a kid, I needed that one person to do that influence. All these kids in the system, it’s horrible. They need to find that one person who isn’t there mom and dad. Group homes aren’t the answer, incarcerating them isn’t the answer.”
- **On the need to provide clear sanctions and incentives for youth:** “All kids test limits—and [as parents] we always find out. ... We’re super strict but we incentivize him as well.”
- **On the lack of clear accountability for youth in the system:** “There wasn’t accountability. [My son has] never really had to be accountable because people [in the juvenile justice system] are always telling him what to do and not to do so he’s never really had to make his own decisions.”