

Date: July 27th, 2021, 4:00pm

Location: Conference room at Urban Strategies Council

Participants: 5 young men, released from DJJ 7 months - 4 years ago; self-identified race 4 African-American, 1 Latino

Facilitator: Dani Soto, PhD, Impact Justice, with special thanks to Kelvin Potts, Rites of Passage

At the request of Interim Chief Probation Officer, Marcus Dawal, Dr. Dani Soto facilitated a focus group with five young men who had previously been confined at a Department of Juvenile Justice (DJJ) state facility. The purpose of this focus group was to hear directly from the youth regarding their experiences in DJJ, during release and reentry, and to hear suggestions that they have.

Much of what they shared regarding challenges, concerns and recommendations are supported by other research and reports.

### **Programming**

Participants shared that they did not feel that most programming at DJJ was culturally sensitive, or actually helpful. "You go [to programming] to get through, pass, so you can go home." They reported that staff seemed to "create programs" on the spot involving cleaning, showering, etc. and seemed to use those "programs" as a form of punishment.

### **Family Engagement**

Participants had many suggestions for how family visitations could be more "natural" and facilitate better connections with family members. Participants strongly suggest that incarcerated youth:

- Have free phone calls with family members
- Be able to touch family members - give hugs, hold hands, etc.; there should be no "no contact" visits
- Be able to see other family members, regardless of age (i.e. some family members were "too young" to come for a visit)
- Have access to home visits & day trips (participants acknowledged that such visits would probably depend on good behavior)
- Allow youth to choose their own family members, even if not biologically related
- Be able to have visits outside of the unit
- Be able to take walks on the grounds of the facility with family members
- If supervised visits are needed or required, have those visits in a separate room

Participants also appreciated gas cards to help family members afford the transportation to come visit.

### **Staff**

Participants shared that they all knew who "good" staff were vs "bad" staff. They shared that good staff: "talk to you instead of punish"; understand them; don't shut down programs for the bad behavior of one person; have good intentions & often have children themselves; come from similar backgrounds as the youth themselves; "let small things slide"; and don't withhold food as a form of punishment. They also recommended that if staff don't work their assigned shifts that the staff member get penalized - because the youth themselves end up getting penalized with room confinement, etc. They also note that even when short-staffed, "cool staff can handle more kids at a time" because youth are more well behaved with "cool" staff.

## **Discipline & Behavior Management**

Participants shared that they found seemingly arbitrary rule changes, punishments, and restrictions to be very unfair, discouraging, and causing anger and frustration. They reported that staff “found ways to make us stay in our room.” As noted above, staff also seemed to create ad hoc “programs” involving cleaning, etc. as a form of punishment. Staff would also make up rules when it seemed to suit them; rules regarding no talking, not being allowed to ask any questions, etc. They also reported that food would be withheld as a form of punishment. They reported that because of the policy allowing an entire unit to be punished for the bad behavior of one youth, staff “would wait for something to happen” so they could lock down the unit.

## **Coping with Incarceration**

Because these youth had spent significant time at DJJ, we also wanted to ask them what “helped you do your time.” Youth shared various things that helped them cope:

- Having people depend on me
- Having dreams and goals of my own
- Working on “my mental strength and keeping eyes on goals”
- Knowing that bad behavior isn’t worth it - “I didn’t come this far to f\* it up”
- Feeling responsible for younger program members
- Learning how to “maintain and solve your own problems” - you can’t run away from your problems
- Developing mutually respectful relationships with staff

## **Release & Reentry**

Participants reported the board hearing process to be demoralizing and dehumanizing. They expressed that “you should be able to do your time and then get out, not have to plead and beg with the Board.” They also recommend that youth should not have to wait so long between hearings. They point out that the “no’s” are so demoralizing, and also demotivates good behavior: “makes you feel like you don’t have a reason to behave & do right if your next hearing isn’t for years.”

Participants reported “need[ing] help and support after being locked up; it’s a shock.” They shared that they felt institutionalized (their word): feelings of anxiety and like they were “being watched”; they wished they could have “eased back into the community.” They pointed out that even though they were “locked up, it still does become your community, but with its own rules, own systems” making it harder to transition back to “normal.” They shared that it took several months on the outside before they felt comfortable, and that they “had friends” who were scared to go home, particularly those without parents.

During reentry, they shared that mentors - “someone that you really connect with one-on-one” - were instrumental in helping them transition back into their communities. They stressed the importance of regular contact, not just monthly, “especially for kids without dads”. They wanted daily contact for the first month or so. They also stressed that mentors should keep their promises and help them get ready for release. Mentors can provide support and “help us stay focused” on their reentry goals. They shared that the other required programs they were required to participate in weren’t as helpful, stating that their probation officers “didn’t ask what we need, just assigned what they think we need.”

They shared that the practical help they needed the most upon release was having a job lined up. They reported that they needed more help in applying for jobs. They also stated that many reentry resources were just passive referrals which made it hard to connect with and hard to access - warm handoffs would have been much more helpful.

## **DJJ compared with JJC**

\*Note: All but 1 of the young men present had spent time at JJC as well

Participants generally described the DJJ as being better than JJC. At DJJ they have access to a canteen and more options for programming. One participant shared “I was always hungry in the hall” (referring to JJC). They expressed liking mixing between units, which was done at DJJ (except at Chad).

One exception to this was that participants described the staff at JJC as being “nicer” than the staff at DJJ.

## **Recommendations for SB 823 Program**

During the focus group introductions I explained what SB 823 changed & answered questions they had about it. I asked them what they would recommend & what they thought would help youth who were committed to the SB 823 program.

In addition to the insights and recommendations offered above, participants also shared the following suggestions:

- Give youth access to a canteen/commissary
- Get youth feedback on whether they like a program or if it’s working for them
- Recommend a dorm/camp style environment with more freedom to move about the unit
  - Have open doors in the unit whenever possible: open to day room & outside
- Have programming take place outside of the unit, in different buildings
- Have more free time and choice over what you want to do
- Be able to go outside and take a walk when you want
- Ban the use of chokehold restraints, prone restraints, and withholding food or interfering with meals as punishments
- Strongly encourage several months of inside/outside
- Actual jobs (not just referrals) lined up on release
- Mentorship with someone who can follow them throughout their reentry process & connection with their mentor while still incarcerated
- Review probation violations: violations shouldn’t include cannabis use if youth are old enough
- Avoid the use of harsh chemicals in the cells & common areas; several participants reported burning lungs, coughing, & difficulty breathing when using or being around the cleaning chemicals
- Participants were encouraged by the closing of DJJ and urge the closure of the Halls as well