

Federal Officials Hear the Stories of Youth with Incarcerated Parents

On June 28 and 29, 2016 a 2 day listening session with youth who have or have had incarcerated parents was held in Washington DC. This listening session was supported by the Office of Human Services Policy in the Office of the Assistant Secretary for Planning and Evaluation at the US Department of Health and Human Services and the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention at the US Department of Justice. It was organized by the American Institutes for Research, through the Interagency Working Group on Youth Programs, and the National Resource Center on Children and Families of the Incarcerated at Rutgers University, Camden, NJ.

This historic event was the first time that youth with incarcerated parents were brought together from all parts of the US to not only discuss the issues and concerns they and their families face but also to present their stories and recommendations to senior officials in various agencies of the Federal Government.

Attendees included 19 youth between the ages of 15 and 23, from 13 states. They shared their experiences of having incarcerated mothers or fathers and sometimes both parents. They talked about the challenges and struggles as well as the supports and programs that helped them. And they told Federal Officials how policies and practices could be more helpful to them and their families.

Ann Adalist-Estrin, NRCCFI Director, recruited the youth by connecting with a wide variety of agencies and organizations that serve children and families of the incarcerated. She also co-facilitated the Listening Session with AIR representatives including David Osher, Vice President and Institute Fellow; Mary Thorngren, Principal Project Specialist; Simon Gonsoulin, Principal Researcher; and Juliette-Marie deSousa, Senior Researcher.

NRCCFI and AIR will now work with the youth to create 2 documents from the information gathered at this Listening Session: A Tip Sheet for Youth with Incarcerated Parents and a Tip Sheet for Service Providers Working with Children and Families of the Incarcerated. These publications will be available soon on www.Youth.gov

AIR and NRCCFI thank the following programs for their assistance with this process: Arkansas Voices for the Children of the Incarcerated, Little Rock, AR; Big Brothers Big Sisters of Flagstaff Arizona; Pima Prevention Partnership in Tucson AZ; Pops The Club in Los Angeles CA; Project WHAT, San Francisco, CA; Connecticut CIP Project at Central Connecticut State University; Circles and Ciphers, Chicago, IL; US Dream Academy Indianapolis Center; The Family Connections Center, New Hampshire Department of Corrections; Osborne Association, NY; Our Children's Place at Coastal Horizons Center, Inc., Durham, NC; Northwest Family Services, Portland, Oregon; Girl Scouts Beyond Bars, Philadelphia, PA; Amachi Pittsburgh, Pittsburgh, PA; and Seedling Foundation, Austin, TX.

The youth from these agencies were a representative sample of the estimated 2.7 million U.S. children, or 1 in 28, that have a parent in prison or jail. Despite their strength and resilience, the shame and stigma associated with parental incarceration and the pain of separation from parents was a part of most of their stories. Some youth had experience telling their stories but many had chosen not to discuss their circumstances with others until this Listening Session. As one youth said "this group felt just like a family after only 2 days" reminding us of the importance of providing opportunities for children of the incarcerated to connect with each other.

This gathering of youth and the materials they will create will help to continue the unprecedented focus that the Obama Administration has had on Children of the Incarcerated.

For some of the youth stories from the Listening Session, go to <http://www.hhs.gov/blog/2016/07/05/hhs-and-doj-host-listening-session-youth.html>