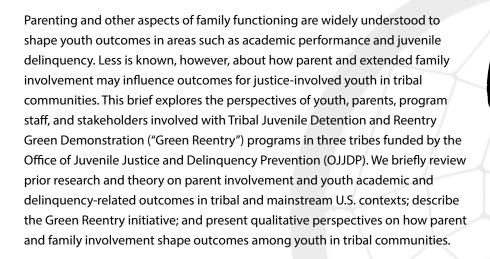# Parent and Family Involvement with Youth in the Tribal Juvenile Justice System:
Perspectives from OJJDP's Tribal Green Reentry Initiative

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Parenting and other aspects of family functioning are widely understood to shape youth outcomes in areas such as academic performance and juvenile delinquency. Less is known, however, about how parent and extended family involvement may influence outcomes for justice-involved youth in tribal communities. This brief explores the perspectives of youth, parents, program staff, and stakeholders involved with Tribal Juvenile Detention and Reentry Green Demonstration ("Green Reentry") programs in three tribes funded by the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention (OJJDP). We briefly review prior research and theory on parent involvement and youth academic and delinquency-related outcomes in tribal and mainstream U.S. contexts; describe the Green Reentry initiative; and present qualitative perspectives on how parent and family involvement shape outcomes among youth in tribal communities.

Background

Parent Involvement and Youth Well-being
Parent involvement is widely understood to shape youth outcomes, including delinquency and academic achievement. The National Caucus of Native American State Legislators (2008) has called for new strategies for increasing parent involvement in tribal communities, which they characterize as crucial to closing the academic achievement gap between Native and non-Native students. Pomerantz, Moorman, & Litwack's (2007) review of literature on parenting and youth achievement suggests that the mechanisms by which parent involvement shapes youth success are not well understood. However, they emphasize that certain qualities of parent involvement—including supporting children's autonomy, demonstrating positive affect, focusing on process rather than innate ability, and holding positive beliefs about children's potential—exert more influence than parent involvement quantity.

Parenting also influences youth risk behavior and delinquency. In their qualitative work with elders, parents, youth, and program staff in three tribal communities,

This report presents qualitative perspectives on parent and family involvement among justice-involved youth who participated in Green Reentry programs. Youth, parents, staff, and stakeholders identified:

- The influence of various forms of parent involvement on youth well-being,

- The role of other family members,

- Challenges to positive parent and family involvement, and

- Strategies for encouraging it.

Findings suggest that offering whole-family programming and working to improve communication between parents and the youth-serving staff who work with their children could result in increased parent and family involvement and better outcomes for youth in tribal communities.

Mmari et al. (2010) found that community members characterized parent involvement, particularly parent-child communication and support, as the most important positive influence on youth delinquency outcomes. They also found that parental neglect and parental absence contributed negatively to youth delinquency. Morris, Wood, & Dunaway (2007) found that parenting influenced involvement in property crimes among tribal youth (but not through the mechanism of self control observed among white youth). Kulis et al. (2006) found that parental neglect influenced tribal youth substance abuse, and that drug offers from parents exerted a particular influence on substance abuse among young women.

Role of Extended Family

Family members other than biological parents play a pivotal role in youth well-being in tribal communities. Intensive grandparent involvement with youth can be prompted by diverse situations, including parental relocation for employment or long-distance commuting from job-starved reservation communities, parental economic or behavioral health crises, grandparents' desire to pass on traditional cultural wisdom, and the desire among grandparents (particularly those exposed to boarding schools) to prevent children from being removed by white authorities (Cross & Miller, 2005; Weibel-Orlando, 2000). Grandparents' roles can include assuming guardianship and primary caregiving functions for youth whose biological parents are unable to care for them, as well as passing on traditional cultural values, traditions, and histories to youth (Cross & Miller, 2005; Weibel-Orlando, 2000). Grandparents are also a source of normative messages to youth regarding risk behaviors such as tobacco use (Kegler et al., 2000).

Donelan (1999) urges juvenile justice system personnel to take into account the potential influence of aunts, uncles, cousins, and grandparents on tribal youth well-being and recidivism. Donelan notes that stronger extended family networks and more prevalent extended family and/or intergenerational living arrangements are norms in many tribal communities that create richer opportunities for extended family members to support youth and influence their justice system involvement. Aunts, uncles, cousins, and siblings have all been shown to influence tribal youth substance abuse or abstinence from substance abuse (Kulis et al., 2006; Okamoto et al., 2004; Robbers, 2009; Kegler et al., 2000). Mendenhall and Armstrong (1999) found that strong kinship ties with cousins (also understood as siblings in Navajo cultural tradition) contributed to gang formation and involvement among Navajo youth. Yet research on the potential positive influence of aunts, uncles, siblings, and cousins on tribal youth outcomes remains severely limited.

Challenges to Parent and Family Involvement

Although parent and family involvement plays a crucial role in youth well-being in tribal communities, several challenges appear to inhibit it. Research on parents' school involvement in tribal communities suggests that parent involvement is limited by practical constraints such as competing commitments and scarce resources, and also by mistrust and lack of effective communication between parents and those who teach and serve their children (Sanderson, 2012; Mackety & Linder-VanBerschot, 2008). Reflecting a wider trend in which ethnic minority

families are perceived as deficient by those working with their children, parents' intentions and attempts to participate in their children's lives may not translate into forms of participation that are salient to teachers and other youth-serving staff working in tribal communities (Bower & Griffin, 2011; Epstein & Dauber, 1991). Parents in tribal communities may also be discouraged from more active forms of involvement by the perceived assimilationist agenda of mainstream youth-serving institutions (stemming, for example, from tribal communities' experiences with boarding schools), their perceived lack of cultural relevance, and a feeling of being unwelcome (Sanderson, 2012).

Parent involvement in tribal communities is also shaped by collective historical trauma. Research with descendants of American Indian genocide survivors and descendants of Jewish European Holocaust survivors indicates that unresolved grief and trauma are transmitted intergenerationally, and that historical trauma shapes parenting behavior in communities that have survived genocide (Brave Heart, 2013; Yehuda et al., 2009; Brave Heart, 2000). Further, individual trauma histories shape parenting and lead to intergenerational transmission of trauma. Libby et al. (2008) found that parents' own experiences of childhood physical abuse were linked to poorer parenting of their children through the mechanism of parents' lifetime substance abuse.

The Tribal Green Reentry Initiative

Tribal Green Reentry Programs in Three Tribes

Recognizing the need to identify new approaches for promoting well-being among justice-involved tribal youth, OJJDP awarded Tribal Green Reentry grants to three tribes in 2009. The grants funded services to help detained and reentering youth reintegrate into their communities through environmentally sustainable activities consistent with each tribe's culture. (For detailed information about the Green Reentry initiative and funded sites, please see http://www.rti.org/publications/abstract.cfm?pubid=20742.) The Green Reentry programs combined conventional youth reentry activities—such as individual assessments, reentry planning, education, and counseling—with green activities such as gardening and skill development in green technologies. In addition, the three programs incorporated traditional tribal culture through cultural education, activities, and ceremonies.

- **The Rosebud Sioux Tribe's (RST)** Green Reentry program was delivered primarily in the context of a day-reporting educational program at the RST juvenile detention center (Wanbli Wiconi Tipi), in which youth reported to the facility each weekday to participate in schoolwork and other programming. Green Reentry activities included gardening, beekeeping, and greenhouse construction and maintenance, complemented by a strong cultural component including culturally based counseling, Lakota language education, spiritual ceremonies, cultural excursions, community events, and service learning projects in the community.

- **The Hualapai Indian Tribe's** Green Reentry program served all youth who were adjudicated to the Hualapai Juvenile Detention and Rehabilitation Center

(HJDRC), which included Hualapai youth and those placed at the HJDRC by nearby tribal courts. Green Reentry activities included service learning, traditional and hydroponic gardening, beekeeping, and greenhouse construction and maintenance, complemented by cultural activities such as traditional crafts, singing, and sweats. Reentry planning and post-release follow-up were also provided to Hualapai youth, with some youth receiving apprenticeships or job placements with tribal departments.

- **The Mississippi Band of Choctaw Indians' (MBCI)** Green Reentry program was delivered primarily on the MBCI Justice Complex grounds, where a large garden plot and hoop house (with an aquaponics demonstration) were located. It primarily served youth sentenced to probation or under court supervision, with garden work used to fulfill community service requirements. In addition to on-site gardening, youth participated in traditional crafts, attended community events, and participated in field trips to engage in hands-on work with partner agencies, including agricultural demonstrations; workshops on solar panels, permaculture, and native forestry; and volunteer work at the elderly center.

Evaluation Design and Data Sources

The Cross-Site Evaluation of OJJDP's Green Reentry Program is being conducted by RTI International and American Indian Development Associates (AIDA). The purpose of the evaluation is to document program implementation at each Green Reentry site and to determine the impact on the tribal youth and communities served.

Data sources for the current report include individual, semi-structured interviews with:

- Green Reentry program staff, tribal juvenile justice personnel (including judges, prosecutors, public defenders, detention center administrators, and probation officers involved with youth), representatives from educational and cultural agencies, and other key partners (n = 77);
- Youth who were involved with the tribal juvenile justice system and had participated in Green Reentry programs (n = 56); and
- Parents of these youth (n = 41).

In addition, we drew on data from three focus groups with parents of justice-involved youth (n = 17). All interviews and focus groups with youth and parents were led by experienced facilitators from AIDA. Interviews with staff and stakeholders were led by both AIDA and RTI.

This report focuses on perceptions of parent and family involvement in tribal youth reentry programming, as articulated by youth-serving staff, tribal juvenile justice system stakeholders, parents, and youth. For this analysis, the research team reviewed data by interviewee type (youth, parents, and staff/stakeholders), across sites and across data collection waves. Within text data from each type of interviewee, analysts compiled all instances of text that fell within the broad domain of interest (e.g., challenges to parent and family involvement). For each broad domain, we identified analytic themes, or perspectives on the domain that

commonly recurred among that particular type of interviewee. During this process, we also identified the quotes that best illustrated each analytic theme. Finally, we looked across interviewee type to examine areas of convergence and divergence in analytic themes in each domain.

Perspectives on Parent and Family Involvement

Parent Involvement

Staff and stakeholders suggested that parents of the youth they served did not appear to be actively involved in their children's lives. They characterized youth participants' family relationships as unstable and challenging, and frequently recounted incidents of parental neglect, apathy, and abuse. Many youth-serving staff and stakeholders felt that neglectful parenting had led to the problems that brought youth into contact with the juvenile justice system. Expressing a typical sentiment, one stakeholder explained, "What the child is portraying is what is going on at home."

Staff and stakeholders noted that parent involvement in their children's dealings with the juvenile justice system was sometimes quite limited: "The other part that makes it difficult for the child is that some parents are angry and let them rot [in detention]. Or the parent might not show up at the court date." Staff believed that many youth never received a visit from parents or family members while in the juvenile detention center, that parents did not always take court obligations seriously, and that parents of youth on probation often did not support them in complying with their conditions: for example, providing little supervision, allowing youth to violate curfew, and allowing youth to skip school or other court-mandated activities.

In addition to describing a general lack of parent involvement in children's lives and in their dealings with the juvenile justice system, staff and stakeholders reported specific difficulties in securing parent participation in program activities.

> *It's always an extremely difficult thing to get the parents involved because they are so busy leading their second childhood. They are having problems with alcohol, drugs, with relationships, and a tendency to be self-absorbed, and, as a result, lack involvement with their children.*

In all three sites, Green Reentry program staff made initial efforts to contact parents about their children's participation in the program. The extent to which staff at each site persisted in reaching out to parents over the duration of their children's participation in programming seemed to differ both by site and by individual family. Still, staff and stakeholders felt that increased parent involvement in Green Reentry program activities (and in the daily lives of their children) would have a positive effect on youth outcomes.

Parents and guardians of participating youth appear to be aware of how staff and stakeholders perceive them: many say they fear being blamed as the source of their children's challenges and are uncomfortable dealing with the justice system as a result. For example:

> *I worry about being judged, that I don't teach my kids.*

> *The system labels them and it is hard to escape that. It reflects on us.*

When it comes to their involvement with their children, parents and guardians don't share the negative assessment of staff and stakeholders. Parents described being involved in their children's lives in a number of ways, including emotional support and involvement in youth activities.

> *I am not going to condone it. But I also let her know that I am going to be here, unconditionally, no matter what she does or what kind of situation she gets in.*

> *I participate. I take her [to court-related activities]. They talk to us.*

Parents and guardians also noted that grandparents who serve in a primary-parent role for youth need more support to maintain their efforts.

When asked about involvement in the Green Reentry program specifically, most parents and guardians reported that they had not participated in any program activities. They indicated that they did not know how to participate in the program or did not understand what was expected of them.

Youth participants shared little about difficult aspects of their relationships with their parents or guardians. For some, these silences and omissions were poignant. A few youth did not mention a mother or father at all during the course of an interview focused exclusively on parent and family relationships; some youth explicitly stated that their parents were not involved in their lives; and others reported living with or having some contact with a parent, but struggled to think of any examples of parent support or involvement.

Many other youth did characterize their parents or guardians as involved and supportive, often describing it in general terms or with truisms, such as:

> *They support me.*

> *They take care of me.*

> *They keep me out of trouble.*

When prompted for specifics, youth characterized their parents' involvement in terms of instrumental support, emotional support, and participation in youth or family activities. They shared most readily about parent instrumental support. In response to an initial query about how their parents helped or supported them, youth were usually quick to credit parents or guardians for their efforts to meet their basic needs: "Even if we run out of money, they will try to get money so we can eat."

Youth also took visible delight in recounting how parents or guardians supported them by buying them things, seeming to find this form of involvement very meaningful:

> *I do bad things but they still love me, and still get me things that I probably don't even need. My mom took me in when I was a kid and has taken care of me. Even though I do bad things, she still shows me that she loves me by getting me stuff.*

Youth also reported receiving various forms of emotional support from their parents or guardians, including expressions of love, understanding, and encouragement.

> *I like having a family. I like that we can talk to each other when we need to. My brothers help me as much as they can, and my mom, just helping support me in unconditional ways with my problems.*

> *My dad is always there. I can count on him. I know that he loves me and stuff, so that's all I really need from him.*

> *They push me to get a better education and to try my hardest to graduate.*

Youth had more difficulty describing their parents' or guardians' involvement in their activities. A few youth characterized their parents or guardians as participating in "everything," while others could not identify any examples at all of parent participation in their activities or any activities that they and a parent or guardian did together as a family. Parents' attendance at youth sporting events was the most common specific example volunteered by youth.

> *When I was in sports in school, they would go. Anything I was in, they would participate in. It was all my family: my mom, my dad, my brothers, my cousins.*

Youth also noted that their parents and caregivers supported them in complying with community supervision terms. For example, youth reported that their parents drove them to court-mandated activities, and (for those on house arrest) accompanied them to places they wanted to go so that youth could be there without violating their court conditions.

Involvement of Other Family Members

When addressing family involvement in program activities or in children's lives more generally, **staff and stakeholders** tended to focus on the family member who was the youth's designated legal guardian or primary caretaker—usually a parent, grandparent, aunt, or uncle. Staff and stakeholders did not often report attempting to involve siblings or non-guardian aunts, uncles, and grandparents in program activities. Nor did they characterize these other family members as playing a central role in the lives of participating youth.

Staff and stakeholders did often acknowledge, however, that extended families had traditionally played a significant part in supporting youth well-being. They lamented the dissolution of some traditional forms of extended family involvement in child-rearing, particularly the role of aunts, uncles, and other community members in providing spiritual and cultural education and discipline.

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I make a comparison with the old ways, where the whole camp was your aunties and uncles, and were concerned for the young people.

In considering the broader context of family relationships, **parents and guardians** most often volunteered concerns about youth's sibling relationships, and did not tend to raise the role of other family members (such as non-guardian aunts, uncles, and grandparents) in the lives of their children. For parents, child care responsibilities for their other children were a chief concern, making time-intensive involvement in the focal youth's activities difficult. Parents also expressed the desire to protect any of their children who were not involved with the juvenile justice system from becoming involved, and expressed worry about the potential for negative peer influence between justice-involved and non-justice-involved siblings.

I would participate—it's just, I have two other children at home.

Having more than one kid, it's kind of [hard] trying to educate the little ones that this is not okay, but still be there to support her.

Youth, however, shared many ways in which family members other than their parents were involved in their lives and affected their well-being. The role of non-parent family members in their lives appeared particularly influential given the large, intergenerational households in which most youth described being raised. These households almost always included extended family members, and did not always include either of the youth's biological parents:

I live with my grandma, my grandpa, my daughter's dad, my daughter, my aunt and uncle. My dad died when I was five, and my mom's not there. Whoever wants to live there, does. You just come and go. The door's always open.

I live with my grandpa, my cousin, my auntie and her kid, and sometimes my dad. My grandpa always helps me. My grandma, too, she helps me. And my cousin, he tries to help me, and I try to help him, too.

Youth often reported receiving emotional support and encouragement from siblings, aunts, and uncles. They cited older siblings as setting positive examples, or reported that older siblings who had difficulty in school or had been involved with the justice system encouraged them to be different, for example, "My brother doesn't want me to turn out like him. He wants me to get my high school diploma."

Youth also reported that aunts and uncles were very involved in their lives. Many youth lived with aunts or uncles or had aunts and uncles who regularly spent time in their homes; a few were being raised by their aunts or uncles as primary caregivers. Youth described aunts and uncles as providing emotional and occasionally cultural support:

My auntie is kind of like my other mom.

My aunt said that whenever I feel angry or sad I can talk to her.

[How do your family members support you with cultural things?] My uncle has some books, and he'll use a Lakota word in a joke. My uncle offers the books to me, and my mom tries to get me to read, but I don't really like to read.

The involvement of siblings, aunts, and uncles was not always described as positive. Some youth noted that they had siblings, aunts, or uncles who were involved with the justice system or were abusing substances, often in the home where the youth lived. Youth felt that the proximity of these family members' activities sometimes made it more difficult for them to stay sober or avoid further justice system involvement themselves.

> *I hang around my brothers a lot and they get in trouble, and I'm on probation so I shouldn't hang around them.*

> *My aunties and them like drinking, and it's always at my house, it's constantly drinking.*

The influence of grandparents, however, was described in unambiguously positive terms. Many youth interviewees were being raised by their grandparents. These youth tended to speak exclusively about the support given them by their grandparents, as opposed to focusing on any lack of support or involvement of their parents. In fact, the youth in this sample who reported the most comprehensive "parent" involvement was referring to her grandparents. Grandparents who served in a primary parenting role for youth modeled many qualities of positive involvement: they provided encouragement, communicated positive expectations for youth behavior, helped youth with completing school work, encouraged and supported school attendance, assisted youth in their dealings with the juvenile justice system, participated in family activities with youth, and regularly checked in on where youth were and what they were doing.

Whether or not grandparents played a guardian or primary caretaker role for them, youth reported widespread grandparent involvement in their lives and many other contributions to their well-being. In particular, youth reported that their grandparents assumed responsibility for teaching them their traditional languages, engaging them in traditional cultural activities, and sometimes sharing traditional spiritual practices and teachings.

> *We go to Harney Peak or down in Nebraska and put up teepees in the summer, we go to [traditional cultural activity], we go to sundance. We have sweats at our house. My grandma teaches me Lakota.*

> *During the summer, I go to Montana with my great-great-grandparents, and we do the ceremonies. They don't make us learn it, but they let us know we're the last generation, we're a dying culture, and that makes us want to learn more. We smudge every day, and I call my grandma [traditional term] and speak in our traditional language.*

Youth also reported that grandparents were a source of emotional support. Grandparents often provided this support in their own, traditional ways:

> *If we're having a bad day, my grandpa would ride out to the pastures and talk to us while we're riding horse, and go do fun things with us.*

Challenges to Parent and Family Involvement

Staff and stakeholders described practical, contextual, and behavioral health barriers as interfering with parents' positive involvement with their children. Common practical barriers to parent involvement included parents' child care responsibilities for their other children, their work schedules, and a lack of transportation.

In terms of contextual barriers, staff and stakeholders suggested that parents were challenged to understand their own roles and responsibilities in the context of their children's engagement with the juvenile justice or public school systems. They observed that some parents felt that they had turned over care and responsibility for their children to these systems. Some believed that parents depended too heavily on such institutions (or particular tribal employees who worked with youth) to meet their children's needs, while others noted that an adversarial relationship existed between parents and tribal employees who worked with their children. In either case, staff and stakeholders felt that parents lacked a clear understanding of their responsibilities as parents in the context of their children's involvement with the juvenile justice system.

> *It takes time for someone to realize what their responsibilities are and see that they are a part of things, even though they may not feel it. There is such a "you – us" kind of a thing, so it's kind of set everybody up to be adversarial in a way.*

Finally, staff and stakeholders felt that behavioral health issues, such as individual and collective histories of trauma and the prevalence of substance abuse problems among parents, presented a challenge to healthy parent involvement.

> *From the generations of historical trauma, we've come to a point now where…a lot of these parents never tell their kids they love them. They think that all their drinking and drugging is normal.*

Unlike staff and stakeholders, **parents** did not characterize behavioral health issues as a barrier to parent involvement. They did, however, identify similar practical and contextual barriers to their involvement as those described by staff and stakeholders. The practical barriers cited by parents included work schedules, child care responsibilities for other children, and challenges with transportation. Parents also described contextual barriers related to the systems in which their children were engaged, including a lack of clarity about what was expected of them while their children were involved with the system, and a sense of pain and trauma at seeing their children in custody or engaged with courts, law enforcement, or community supervision.

> *Just seeing your child in the clothes and shackles, or, like, in handcuffs—that by itself is a scary thing to see. Personally, that wouldn't stop me from going, but I hate to see her like that.*

Many parents expressed mistrust of the juvenile justice system, a reluctance to engage with it, and a fear of being blamed for the challenges their children faced.

Finally, parents identified a lack of communication with program and justice system staff as a barrier to their involvement. Many parents stated that they had

not been informed about the Green Reentry program in general, about their child's participation in specific activities, or about opportunities for parents to participate. In addition, parents often conflated Green Reentry program staff and other justice system staff such as detention center personnel or probation officers, and expressed frustration about a general lack of communication about their children's activities and progress.

> *There is no communication between the staff and the parents. We didn't know what was happening.*

Reflecting on what made it difficult for parents to be involved in Green Reentry program activities or in other aspects of their children's lives, **youth** echoed many of these same challenges. Youth observed that parents (their own, as well as other parents in their communities) had many demands on their time that might interfere with participation in Green Reentry program activities, but also noted that they did not believe their parents had been invited to participate in any such activities.

When asked what could make it easier for parents to be involved, a number of youth offered suggestions like "quit drinking," suggesting that they perceived parents as having underlying behavioral health issues that needed to be addressed before they could be positively involved. Other youth responses conveyed a complex of practical and behavioral health barriers that shaped parental involvement (or the lack of it):

> *Sometimes transportation's a big deal. But sometimes it's just because they just don't care. And I mean, you can't make someone care. So it's really hard to answer that question.*

Strategies for Engaging Parents and Families

Youth, parent, staff, and stakeholder insights converged on two major strategies for supporting the involvement of parents and other family members: (1) improved communication between youth-serving staff (including program staff and justice system employees) and parents or guardians, and (2) a whole-family approach to programming that engages parents, siblings, grandparents, and extended family members.

Improved Program Communication with Parents and Guardians

All three groups of interviewees (youth, parents, and staff/stakeholders) agreed that communication difficulties represented a major barrier to parent and guardian involvement in Green Reentry program work and related aspects of justice-involved children's lives. Improved communication could help to address a host of issues identified by parents and staff: an occasionally adversarial and mistrustful relationship between parents and youth-serving staff, and parents' lack of information regarding their children's activities, their opportunities to participate, and their expected responsibilities as parents.

These interview data suggest seven steps that tribal juvenile justice system and tribal program staff who work with youth can take to cultivate open, positive communication with their parents and guardians.

1. **Make persistent and repeated contact with parents and guardians.** Parents and staff both suggested that reaching parents requires persistence. Staff who succeeded in communicating with parents often reached out to them multiple times, using multiple means, such as in-person meetings, letters, and phone calls. Findings from this study suggest that even if parents do not seem responsive to these attempts, it is important that program staff continue to reach out to them. Staff experiences during the latter two years of Green Reentry program implementation particularly indicated that home visits are preferable to other forms of in-person contact, because parents are more comfortable at their own homes (rather than the formal setting of the courts or detention center) and meeting parents at home also addresses their transportation difficulties.

2. **Ensure parents and guardians receive frequent updates on their children's activities and understand any restrictions on communication.** Many parents felt starved for information about their children's progress during their involvement with the juvenile justice system. For example, many parents did not fully understand or were frustrated with procedures for telephoning, visiting, or getting money to their children while the youth were detained. Addressing parents' underlying confusion and frustration would help to build their receptiveness to communications from program staff working with their children during and after a detention stay.

3. **Distinguish between voluntary programs and justice system sanctions.** Parents and youth both had difficulty distinguishing between the Green Reentry program and other aspects of youth justice system involvement, such as court diversion, detention, and community supervision. Although the distinction between sanctions and voluntary program participation may be blurred in some cases (for example, when participation in a program is mandated by a judge), it is still important for parents to understand which of the individuals working with their children are employed by the justice system to enforce legal sanctions, and which staff members are providing enrichment services aimed at supporting youth.

4. **Help parents and guardians understand where they fit in.** Parents, youth, and staff all suggested that many parents and guardians struggle to understand where they fit in once institutions such as the juvenile justice system have intervened in the lives of their children. Parents and guardians need clear information about what youth-serving programs such as the Green Reentry programs expect of them in general, and what specific opportunities exist for them to participate in regular program activities or special events.

5. **Accommodate parents' schedules**. Parents, youth, and staff all suggested that parents' work commitments prevented them from being more involved. Staff and stakeholders also suggested that some parents might need to "meet staff halfway" by better prioritizing participation in their children's activities. When parent involvement in a specific activity is requested, staff should make every effort to plan it at a convenient time for most parents, and to advise parents well

Differing Perspectives on Punitive Parent Involvement Strategies

As detailed in other project briefs (e.g., http://www.rti.org/pubs/topicalbrief1_final_feb2013.pdf) Green Reentry program staff and stakeholders often called for more formal or punitive strategies for promoting parent involvement. One site mandated various aspects of parental involvement (parent orientation, parent-teacher conferences, weekly update calls, report card pick-up, and school enrollment), while the other two used court orders to attempt to enforce the youth's participation in the Green Reentry Program. Staff and stakeholders suggested consequences such as jail time (for neglect) and mandatory parenting classes for parents who do not participate in required activities. In addition to formal legal sanctions, some staff felt that clarifying program requirements and creating formal written agreements with parents could be helpful. For example, one site had parents and youth sign an agreement at the program orientation that spelled out program rules, policies, and expectations in order to promote joint youth-parent accountability.

Such a perspective was not shared by youth or parents, however. In fact, youth and parent interview data suggest that the use of such strategies should be considered cautiously, given the potential to exacerbate parents' existing negative feelings about their dealings with the system and their sense of being blamed for their children's difficulties.

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in advance to allow them to make advance arrangements to attend. (Parents who work for tribal enterprises, such as tourist services or casinos, often need at least two weeks' advance notice to request time off or a change in work shifts.)

6. **Cultivate positive, non-judgmental relationships**. Parents and staff each indicated the importance of building a personal relationship based on mutual concern for youth. Parents may need to understand that staff do not blame them for the problems their children face (if this is indeed the case), and that staff are available to support them in the challenging and sometimes lonely task of parenting. Staff can acknowledge the strengths present in the family, the universal difficulties that parents face in raising adolescent or teenage children, as well as any contextual challenges—for example, historical trauma, negative experiences with institutions such as schools and justice systems, or lack of employment—that parents on their reservation are facing. Staff who are culturally knowledgeable can often use their traditional language or cultural ways to build rapport with parents and guardians in an otherwise mistrustful situation. Finally, parents, staff, and stakeholders all reported that providing concrete help to the family on something of importance to the parent or guardian (even if not directly related to program activities) goes a long way toward fostering mutual trust and communication.

7. **Be available.** Parents expressed frustration about not knowing whom to contact about their children, not having calls returned, or being told repeatedly to call back. Although this challenge seemed to stem from negative experiences with juvenile justice system personnel more generally, program staff wishing to foster communication with parents and elicit their responsiveness would do well to ensure that parents feel responded to as well. Program staff may be able to assist parents by providing them with a clear understanding of whom to contact for particular issues, and when necessary and possible, brokering those communications to ensure that parents receive a response. Stakeholders also suggested that tribal agencies could collaborate to provide parents of justice-involved youth with a single point of contact for all of the justice agencies, social services organizations, and grant-funded programs working with their child(ren), to reduce the overwhelming volume of communications from various entities that parents may be receiving.

Whole-Family Programming

Interviewees' diverse perspectives also clearly aligned with regard to a need for whole-family program approaches. Many youth interviewed for this project lived in extended-family households in which the influence of non-parent family members appeared considerable. Further, interviewees in all three groups (youth, parents, and staff/stakeholders) spoke strongly about the current or traditional importance of extended family in the lives of youth. Some invoked kinship ties that stretched even beyond the extended biological family to include youth-serving staff and other community members who were called to support youth.

> *The concept of kinship: that's the basis, the societal structure of who we are as Native people. Even though that's a cornerstone, it's really become fragmented. We're fighting constantly to reclaim that notion of kinship. If there is a clear*

understanding of what that means, we would be better equipped to acknowledge who our relatives are and take them back in.

By engaging a broad set of family members in program activities, youth-serving programs can help to honor the stated importance of grandparents, aunts, uncles, and siblings for youth well-being, help communities' efforts to restore traditional notions of kinship and broaden the circle of support available to youth and parents, and overcome parent involvement barriers related to child care responsibilities (including parents' desire not to prioritize one of their children's well-being over the others).

Findings from these interviews suggest four ways that tribal program staff working with youth can build a whole-family approach to this work.

1. **Reach out to grandparents, aunts, uncles, and other adult family members.** Youth were readily able to identify the adult members of their households (whether permanent or occasional), as well as other important adults in their lives. These included biological parents, guardians, and almost always additional extended family members such as grandparents, aunts, and uncles. Involve these family members by telling them about program activities, sharing youth accomplishments (being careful to respect youth confidentiality), and letting them know about any ongoing opportunities to participate, such as a regular community garden workday. Findings regarding parent outreach strategies suggest that contacting these family members multiple times and in multiple ways will yield the best results.

2. **Make program events fun and kid-friendly.** Parents and guardians often have many parenting-related commitments to which they cannot bring their other children, such as court dates and parent-teacher conferences. Rather than adding another request to this list, design fun, kid-friendly events and make it clear that siblings are welcome. If possible, offer events at mealtime and provide a family meal. Other incentives, such as raffles, can help to make events a positive experience for family members of all ages.

3. **Create activities that are personally meaningful.** Activities that reflect the unique character and goals of a program are important. However, youth and parents indicate that family members are more motivated by opportunities to show up for and support their children than by opportunities to support a program or fulfill an obligation. Youth interviews suggest that sports events featuring youth are often meaningful to families in this way (and are also potentially fun and kid-friendly for siblings).

4. **Create activities that are culturally meaningful.** These data suggest that activities involving family members are also more successful when they are culturally meaningful. Events that include sharing traditional cultural practices, using the traditional language, or engaging in spiritual ceremonies relevant to youth can offer a chance to enact the broader, traditional concept of kinship described in these interviews. They allow parents, guardians, extended family members, and other community members (including youth-serving staff) to come together in their shared commitment to protect, nurture, and honor their youth and culture.

You have to use the word ceremony because that's the only way parents will respect it. This is a healing facility, and we need to use ceremonies that get [parent] input. We need to talk to them as relatives, tell them what we are trying to do, and explain that the only way we can get the child to grow is to work together.

Conclusion

Youth, parents, and youth-serving program staff and stakeholders described a tremendous influence of parent, guardian, and other family member involvement on youth well-being in tribal communities. Green Reentry program implementation experiences in the Rosebud Sioux Tribe, the Mississippi Band of Choctaw Indians, and the Hualapai Indian Tribe suggest that efforts to foster such involvement are not easy.

To succeed, programs must address the major barriers to parent and family member involvement, including the effects of individual and historical trauma on parenting, difficult relationships between parents and the personnel who work with their children, parents' competing time commitments, and resource scarcity. Perhaps more importantly, however, attempts to involve parents and family members in youth well-being must build squarely on the family, community, and cultural strengths—such as traditional notions of kinship and a shared desire to keep the tribal culture alive for future generations—which predate such programs and will likely endure beyond them.

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