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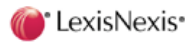


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Report offers reform plan for Va. juvenile justice system

The report was designed to "set the record straight" about the juvenile justice system and its impact


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By Sarah Hutchins
The Virginian-Pilot

HAMPTON ROADS, Va. — Dozens of Hampton Roads families shared their experiences in the juvenile justice system as part of a critical national report released this week.

Justice for Families, a national alliance of advocacy organizations, authored the report, which included information collected by Families & Allies of Virginia's Youth, said Almeta Harrington of the state group.

Harrington said FAVY used confidential surveys to ask about the experiences of families of youths who have gone through the justice system and adults who did so as children. Harrington said the project questioned 60 to 80 people in Hampton Roads.

The report — released Monday and presented Wednesday to the Virginia Board of Juvenile Justice meeting at the Renaissance Academy in Virginia Beach — was designed to "set the record straight" about the juvenile justice system and its impact.

"In focus groups and surveys, families described how the rapid growth of prison systems, zero-tolerance policies, and aggressive police tactics coupled with the decline of social services and public education have wreaked havoc on their predominantly low-income communities of color," the report read.

Scarce funding for counseling, harsh punishments, and lack of parental involvement in the judicial process have "set up far too many youth for failure," according to the report. "In this context, rather than being a deterrent, the juvenile justice system has functioned as a principal feeder into our nation's vast prison system."

Parents surveyed for the report said they were confused by court proceedings, and 91 percent of family respondents said they thought courts should involve parents when deciding what happens to children found guilty.

Court fees often forced families to choose between paying them or buying necessities like food, according to the report.

Most study participants said they had trouble visiting their incarcerated children, often because facilities were too far away. Unable to keep in touch, parents said, they often did not have time to make plans for when their children were released.

The report also included a plan for "a family-driven, trauma-informed youth justice system." Steps included:

— Ending zero-tolerance behavior policies in schools. Such policies lead to students being "arrested, suspended, or expelled due to truancy, roughhousing, and other run-of-the-mill adolescent behavior."

— Having juvenile courts and corrections agencies outline the rights of families at each stage of the judicial process.

— Closing "inherently abusive and dangerous youth prisons." Instead, children who need to be confined should be held in "small, community-based facilities" close to home.

— Providing families with peer support and family partners who can help them understand rules surrounding school, arrest, court, probation and placement.

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