

Roger Jarjoura: My name is Roger Jarjoura. I'm a Principal Researcher at the American Institutes for Research and a Senior Advisor for the Corrections and Community Engagement Technical Assistance Center. On behalf of the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention and the American Institutes for Research, we welcome you to Second Chance Month 2023. And thank you for all of your efforts to improve the lives of young people returning to our communities from incarceration.

This podcast is episode one in the series on Practitioner Researcher Partnerships for the Evaluation of Second Chance Act Programs. In this episode, I'm talking with representatives from the Georgia Department of Juvenile Justice and their evaluation partner from Emory University. In this conversation, we are discussing their current Second Chance Act grant and the evaluation that is underway through this strong partnership.

So let's just start. I'll have each of you introduce yourself, tell us who you are and what your title is.

Cathy Smith-Curry: Hello, I'm Cathy Smith-Curry, and I serve as the Director for the Office of Reentry Services with the Georgia Department of Juvenile Justice. It's great to be here.

David Schwartz: And I'm David Schwartz. I'm the Strategic Planning Coordinator for the Georgia Department of Juvenile Justice and I also serve as the Research Review Committee Chairman.

Roger Jarjoura: Okay. Welcome. So I'd love to hear how you found the evaluator that you're working with on the project that we're talking about today and how you established that partnership.

David Schwartz: Sure, yeah, I can address that. So our agency actually has a fairly robust network of research colleagues and these range across government, academic partnerships, graduate researchers, and then research that's under direct technical advisement with the agency or under collaborative efforts. So in terms of emerging initiatives, like our exploration of family advisory councils, we benefit from our continuing relationships with our colleagues in academia.

Roger Jarjoura: So Kaitlin, could you introduce yourself, tell us who you are, your position?

Kaitlin Piper: Yeah. I'm Kaitlin Piper. I am a PhD candidate at Emory University in Rollins School of Public Health in the Behavioral Sciences Department. And I have been collaborating on projects with the Department of Juvenile Justice in Georgia for about the past seven years. And today I think we're going to talk a little bit about our Family Engagement Project with the juvenile justice system in Georgia.

Roger Jarjoura: So tell me, how did you come to be involved in the evaluation of the Family Engagement Program?

Kaitlin Piper: Yeah. So like I said, I've been working with Department of Juvenile Justice for a while now, and I knew that this was a big priority for the department, was really

improving the ways that they work with families and partner with families to improve kids' outcomes.

So I knew that this was kind of a priority area and it's also an area where I have a lot of research-based expertise in. So it was actually, I approached the department with kind of wanting to do a project with family engagement and kind of seeing how we can improve the ways that we work with families in the juvenile justice setting.

So I did approach the Juvenile Justice commissioners and then they linked me with David and Cathy, who are kind of the champions for family engagement in Georgia Juvenile Justice system. So they really linked me with the people who were doing this work. And then we kind of worked together to collaboratively develop a project where we could evaluate some of the strengths and barriers to working with families in this setting and develop recommendations for improving family engagement.

Roger Jarjoura: And so is it the case then that you were involved in the design of the intervention too?

Kaitlin Piper: So they're the ones doing all of that great work of programmatic development. I am more of the methods person coming in to kind of evaluate what they're doing.

Roger Jarjoura: Okay. All right. So can you talk a little bit about the methods that you're using, what the evaluation looks like?

Kaitlin Piper: Yeah. So for the evaluation, we're involving both staff and families in the evaluation. The family component is coming up soon, but so far we've involved staff across 61 different agencies in Georgia. So this was a really comprehensive project of family engagement. So we involved a lot of different agencies, 60 different agencies in Georgia to kind of see what strategies they're using for involving families and getting staff perceptions of what some of their strengths are and what are some of the barriers that they're encountering to working with families. So that involved a lot of surveys and in-depth qualitative interviews with staff.

And then in the next phase of the study, which is coming up and I'm very excited about, is we're actually going to be doing in-depth interviews with families to really get their perspective...

Roger Jarjoura: Oh, excellent.

Kaitlin Piper: ... and their needs and what they want to see happen in the juvenile justice setting.

So I would say this is more of a pre-implementation, formative type work where we're doing more surveys and interviews to get perceptions from staff and families.

Roger Jarjoura: Okay. And what did you learn? What have you learned so far, and what's your

sense of how that information's going to be useful?

Kaitlin Piper:

Yeah, absolutely. And so, I mean, overall the department is doing a really amazing job with implementing different programs and strategies to involve families in reentry planning and detention and community services. So I think overall, they've been very strategic about how they're doing the work in the juvenile justice setting. And I've also seen that staff, all the way from line staff to leadership are incredibly committed to partnering with families. So there's just a really nice culture in the system to working with families.

But we did identify some barriers to working with families. I guess I can talk about a few of those. I think one of the biggest ones that came up in our data collection was that families, they're not always super trusting of Justice staff. Sometimes they've come from backgrounds where they've experienced a lot of trauma or other issues where they're not going to be as engaged with Juvenile Justice staff.

And so I think we need to think about ways to be very intentional about how we're increasing family participation and buy-in into these services that we're providing in the juvenile justice setting. And I know the department right now, they're working on starting a family advisory committee, which I think is going to be amazing for developing relationships between Juvenile Justice and families and community, getting that buy-in and trust and really involving them in policy and programmatic development in the justice system.

And another barrier that I would say we identified was kind of around accessibility for families and transportation. So sometimes families, they really want to be involved in their kids services, but sometimes that's not accessible to them or financially feasible for them to participate in. So that was kind of another barrier.

And then we also looked at some of the variability in the way that family engagement is conducted across the 60 different agencies in the state. So we found that there were certain factors that helped agencies do a better job at providing these family-engaged services. For instance, having site-level leaders that were really committed to family engagement and prioritize this was really important for implementing these programs and agencies across the state, as well as agencies are doing a better job if their staff had more training on how to work with families and engage families. So I think there's definitely an opportunity to think about how can we develop a family engagement training for all staff and all agencies so that we can really increase consistency in the way that the programs are implemented across agencies in the state.

But yeah, overall they're doing an amazing job. This department is very committed to family engagement.

Roger Jarjoura:

Great. And you talked about the next phase is going to be interview? Did you say it was going to be interviews with...

Kaitlin Piper:

Interviews with families, yes.

Roger Jarjoura: Yeah. Is there any collaboration between you and the department in terms of what questions are going to be on those interviews, or what's your plan for that?

Kaitlin Piper: Yeah, so I did kind of spearhead the development of the interview guide and the department provided feedback on what questions they would like to add or like to see. So there was some co-development in that guide.

Roger Jarjoura: Excellent. Okay. What would you say you've most appreciated about doing this evaluation?

Kaitlin Piper: I would say that working with David and Cathy on this project has been really, really amazing. They're both so passionate and committed to the work that they're doing in the justice system. So that's been really energizing for me to work with people that are just so passionate about this work and has been a really seamless kind of partnership for us. And as a researcher, it's really great when my interests and priorities really align with the interests and priorities of the community partners that I'm working with. And as you know, family engagement is a huge priority for the department, it's an area where I have expertise.

So it was really this really natural fit for us where we could all kind of work together and bring different experiences and expertise to the table to really work on this problem with family engagement. And it's rewarding for me to do the work that I do make tangible impacts.

Roger Jarjoura: That's so great. If you were to start over again with this evaluation, are there things you would approach differently, do you think?

Kaitlin Piper: I think, I guess in my dream scenario doing this work, I want the projects that I do to be driven by the communities that I work in. So in the future, I would really love to have justice-involved families engaged in the development of the evaluation. So for instance, having them provide feedback and help develop the evaluation objectives and questions and kind of inform the types of data that we're collecting because we really want the research and the work that we're doing, we want it to be applicable and relevant to the families that we're serving. So I think really involving them in the process of designing and developing the evaluation would be my dream scenario. And I want the evaluation to be less driven by me as the researcher and more driven by the communities that we're serving.

Roger Jarjoura: Okay. So for other reentry programs out there that are thinking about engaging with an evaluator, what advice do you have for them in terms of getting their program evaluated? And maybe talk a little bit about what kind of resources the program needed in order to engage your services.

Kaitlin Piper: I think financially, since I am associated with a research university, I'm fully funded, so resources in that aspect were not needed for this evaluation. But in terms of staffing resources, I would say making sure there's really good communication between staff and the evaluator. On this project, David was really my liaison

between me and the justice system. So having that point person is really important for me as an evaluator because I'm an outsider, I'm not going to know every inside detail of the justice system, so I'm going to have questions. And I think having that point person is really important.

And I would say also setting expectations upfront is really important to make sure that the evaluator and the staff are kind of on the same page as to what's the time commitment, what rules are expected, what tasks does each party need to be involved in? So setting those expectations up front I think is important. And then just overall, just being honest with what's working and what's not working in the system. And I think being kind of honest with ourselves about what isn't working is really where we identify those strengths and weaknesses to help us improve the services that we're providing to kids and families.

Roger Jarjoura: What should other programs understand about what it's like to be evaluated? What would you say to them about what the experience is like?

Cathy Smith-Curry: For us, it's been very informative and very much appreciated. We've learned a lot from Ms. Piper's research, and we are making efforts in many of our family engagement initiatives to implement the findings of her research to better inform our work and practices and to better engage families and to amplify their voices.

We have as an agency, as David mentioned, we have a very robust approach to collaborating with academia and researchers. And we're always excited about new opportunities to better inform our work and our practices with families especially.

Roger Jarjoura: Do you want to say something about the program that's being evaluated, tell us about that? Because then I'm going to talk about what you've learned and how you're applying that.

Cathy Smith-Curry: David, would you like to speak to the program?

David Schwartz: Sure. So in regards to the program pertaining to family advisory councils, we benefit from our continuing relationships with our colleagues in academia. And so consequently, we have the opportunity to shape these initiatives by communicating out the agency's business needs and better representing the, I guess the research-driven questions and research design that would address some of the nuances of the barriers that our justice-involved families and youth actually experience.

So in the case of family advisory initiatives, both our research partners and our agency have cultivated a naturally relevant line of investigation of those barriers.

Cathy Smith-Curry: And if I might add, Roger, many of our programs and initiatives in the Office of Reentry Services, family engagement is integrated into all of those programs and practices. The foundation of our work in the Office of Reentry Services is our pre-release planning and transitional services where the youth and the family are the focal point.

Much of the research that we have come upon and investigated drives home the point that 90% of families of incarcerated youth are wanting to be a part of their programming and treatment and education. And so we have built the foundation of our work around that research. And Kaitlin's efforts and her research mirror those very same results, that families want to be very much engaged and we want and need them as partners in our efforts.

Roger Jarjoura: That's great. So from what you've learned so far from the evaluation, how does that apply to your program? What are the implications of that? And if you're still waiting for results, what's your intention for how you're going to use those?

Cathy Smith-Curry: Well, I think one of the key findings for us is that we need to always ask parents and families about their needs and what's working for them and where there are opportunities for improvement. Because at the end of the day, as we've already established, we need their partnership in planning for their youth's successful transition back to their communities.

And so we need their voice, we need their input, we need their support, particularly around some of the issues that Kaitlin addressed in her project, around behavioral health. We want families very much engaged in the planning of the services that will continue once a youth returns home. Their support is needed in the planning process. And we know that in order for a youth to be successful, we have to plan for the continuum of care to meet their needs once they're released into the community so that there is no break or gap in the services they're receiving.

And so hearing from the families about any barriers that they may face as it relates to the continuation of those services is critically important prior to release so that we can address those and plan for success.

Roger Jarjoura: If you've worked with other evaluators before, how does this experience measure up? What do you appreciate about your evaluator? What did you come into the relationship in terms of how you set up that to make sure that it was a more positive partnership?

Cathy Smith-Curry: For me, with staff and with families, letting them know that their voice matters and that their input and guidance in this process is all about making things better. With staff in particular, we wanted to know from their point of view what they believe, being that first line of interaction with families, what their understanding is about what families need and what would enhance their engagement and interaction with our agency and how we can better help them to have a more positive experience with that process.

Roger Jarjoura: So I think other state agencies who are doing reentry work are going to be envious of the partnership you developed with the evaluator. What advice would you have for them? How could they set something like this up for themselves?

Cathy Smith-Curry: To be open to our learning and utilizing the information that's received, because at the end of the day, that is what's going to drive improvement in our processes and practices and policies. So being willing to engage and once you receive the information, make it actionable and make it count for the families that we serve.

David Schwartz: And Cathy, if I may add to that, one of the additional benefits that was kind of unexpected was a small publication designed specifically for the agency to inform the staff of the results of the research, particularly the impressions of our reentry care providers and what they saw as necessary components of a family advisory committee.

Cathy Smith-Curry: I agree.

Roger Jarjoura: All right. Anything that I haven't asked you about that you feel like you want to tell the audience?

Cathy Smith-Curry: I would just like to say that this work is critically important. Our belief is that you can't do something for the families or tell the families what to do. We need their voice and we believe that we can't plan for families or youth without their input. It's almost as if we want to do everything that we can for the family, with the family. So we don't want to have the meetings about the family without the family and the youth and their input.

And as I mentioned previously, it's all about amplifying their voice and making sure that we're not just working to help the youth, but to also help the adults in their lives and at the end of that, assisting and supporting the entire family.

Roger Jarjoura: That's great. I don't have any other questions. Thank you both so much for this time.

Cathy Smith-Curry: Thank you.

David Schwartz: Thank you. My pleasure.