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INTRODUCTION

Parents and families have repeatedly informed Ubuntu Village staff that they feel uninformed, disrespected, and confused when navigating the Orleans Parish juvenile court system. They describe their experiences as arbitrary, inconsistent, and often disempowering, and indicate that they feel excluded from major decision making around their child’s case and consequences. These experiences are not unique to Orleans Parish. Davis et al. (2014) found that nationwide caregivers frequently report feeling powerless and blamed in their interactions with juvenile courts. Other scholars similarly indicate that parents felt “clueless” and disrespected in their court interactions (e.g. Luckenbill & Yeager, 2009). Because of these persistent issues, the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention (OJJDP) has offered policy guidelines for juvenile courts. They write that the best approach includes:

*Actively engaging system-involved and formerly incarcerated youth and their families in planning and decision-making that affects their lives. It means giving them a voice in the development of policies, practices, and governance of the agency or systems in which they are involved. Family engagement should be a collaborative relationship where the families are considered partners in both their child’s treatment and the policies, programs, and practices of the juvenile justice system itself. (OJJDP, 2015)*

Due to parent complaints, we were concerned that the Orleans Parish juvenile courts were not adhering to the best practices suggested by OJJDP. Using participatory action research, we gathered data from parents and families through surveys and focus group interviews to determine how widespread and typical the issues brought to us were in the courts.

The report that follows is the result of our research and includes detailed recommendations for improvement suggested by parents and Ubuntu staff.
"Participatory Action Research" is a methodology that emphasizes the importance of co-directing research with those who will be most impacted by its outcomes. It is a transformative process that ends with taking action to address the problems the research reveals (for more on this methodology, see: Fine, 2004; Kemmis, McTaggart, & Nixon, 2013; and publicscienceproject.org). We decided to use this framework because we had three main goals:

1. To better understand parents' concerns with the juvenile courts;
2. To educate and empower parents to successfully advocate for their children;
3. To collaborate with parents to push for meaningful reforms to make the juvenile court system more equitable, humane, rehabilitative, and just.

Ubuntu Village commenced this project by designing a one-page survey with input from parents and family members. The survey asked questions about wait time, parent involvement and effective communication, as well as demographic data. Ubuntu staff members administered the survey to parents waiting in the juvenile court room from June 2017 until January 2018. In total, we collected 71 surveys. This data was compiled and analyzed to create a snapshot of parent interactions over this period in the juvenile courthouse.

Next, we conducted three focus groups with 19 of the survey respondents. We called all 71 parents; however, many of their phone numbers were disconnected or out of service, especially if they had answered the surveys months prior. The interview protocol for the focus groups was developed by Ubuntu staff and questions revolved around the initial complaints we had received as well as new issues brought up by the surveys. These focus group interviews were audio recorded and transcribed.

Finally, we invited nine of the parents from the focus groups to join our Parent Research Team. These parents met with us to analyze the data, determine the most important issues, and suggest potential solutions. They also helped pull out themes from the focus groups, identified salient quotes, and pushed us to think deeply about what solutions would be the most effective and realistic. Parents shared their own experiences and added nuance and explanation to the surveys and focus group data.

The report you are now reading is the result of our collaboration. It is also a call to action! Parents emphasized that they did not want simply to identify issues with the juvenile court process, but that they also wanted to help solve those issues. We hope to use this report to push for changes that will make the juvenile courts more humane, re-direct them toward their mission of rehabilitation, and empower parents to become advocates for their children and leaders in their communities.
Families frequently reported that they were not given the tools to understand their child’s court case. Parents were often confused about key aspects of the process and were unfamiliar with legal jargon essential to advocating for their children. For example, many parents were unfamiliar with the terms “adjudication,” “recidivism,” or “rehabilitation” even after navigating the court system for months or even years. According to parents, the court process was never explained to them or their children. Upon arrival at the court, they typically sat silently with other parents and felt that there was no one present who could answer their questions or provide guidance.

This creates a language barrier between court officials, lawyers, and judges on one hand, and parents on the other. Parents feel like they don’t know the right vocabulary to be understood or taken seriously by the courts.

95% of the parents we surveyed had a public defender. Many complained that no officials at the court, including their lawyer or the judge, communicated with them about what to expect or how to prepare for the trial. 34% of parents reported that they had no contact with their child’s lawyer at all prior to the court date.

Moreover, the process is long and frustrating and parents often report confusion about how the court process is supposed to proceed. Several focus group participants repeatedly attended court dates and waited for hours in the courthouse, only to be informed that the hearing was postponed. Many parents were confused about why the hearings were delayed as well as why they couldn’t have been informed ahead of time. Parents reported delays due to the District Attorney or public defender being unprepared, judges coming in late, trials taking up all the time, co-defendants’ absences, and judges taking long lunch breaks.

Some families indicated that their child had accepted a plea deal to end the long—and seemingly interminable—cycle of court dates and push backs. By drawing out the process, an undue strain is put upon parents and families and taking a plea becomes an attractive option, especially if parents are not fully cognizant of the potential impacts of that plea deal—which can include probation or incarceration. The length of the process undermines the ability of parents and youth to seek justice in their case.

Finally, 40% of parents reported that judges stated no expectations for their child. This lack of communication leaves young people feeling lost and without guidance in the system. It also means that parents are left guessing about how to best support their children.

“As a parent, I know this for sure, there were no resources. And I was wanting to know what was going on and not getting no help from nobody.”
- Focus Group Parent

“If they just come out and communicate with us while we’re in that hallway, it’ll make it a whole lot better. Because then we’d have an understanding [and] our mind would be at ease.”
- Focus Group Parent
As mentioned above, the time burden placed on parents and families navigating the juvenile courts is excessive. According to our survey, the average number of times that a parent had visited the court was 5.7, and they waited an average of 3 hours each time. However, 25% of parents report waiting 4 hours or more during each visit. Because a court visit could be an all-day affair, parents had to take time off work to attend the hearings and children, if not held in secure care, had to miss school.

Parents also noted that there is no public transportation that goes to the facility. Families—often including elderly caregivers and young children—have to walk from the bus stop on St. Bernard Ave.

Parents told us that typically everyone is asked to come at the same time, often 9am, and then judges see the cases one by one while everyone else waits, often for several hours. Frequently, the judges do not even take the bench until hours after families have been told to arrive. Families also have to sit through extended lunch breaks and lengthy trials. This process is inefficient and assumes that parents and young people do not have other obligations.

“I think if your time is for eight, then they should call you at eight o'clock. Don't schedule twenty people for eight...and make the process be even longer. You gotta wait, three, four, five hours...” - Focus Group Parent

In addition to the financial and time burden placed on families, parents report feeling disrespected by judges, who indicate that they are bad parents or they are to blame for their child's mistakes. Often these parents are dealing with other serious issues such as working multiple jobs to stave off the impacts of poverty. In addition, parents report bias: judges seem more interested in hearing from male parents or advocates and white children are given more lenient sentences (as well as being much less likely to be targeted for discipline by schools or by police). 35% of parents reported that they were not given any opportunity to speak or share their perspective during their child's hearing.

“We can't be with [our children] 24/7, not if we got to work and manage our house—bills got to get paid... Some people don't have Section 8, some people don't have housing...” - Focus Group Parent

“Oh, I have yet to see a white child step into the Orleans Parish Juvenile Court.” - Focus Group Parent

Some parents indicated that they thought their judge was very fair and helpful in their particular case. It appears that there is inconsistency between courtrooms and between cases which makes the process feel arbitrary and unfair.

“You're constantly taking off work, missing money. How you gonna pay bills, how you gonna feed your other children?” - Focus Group Parent
CORE ISSUE 3: Lack of Effective Rehabilitative Programs

“They’re treating them [more] like prisoners than kids.” - Focus Group Parent

“And then actually when my kids came out of the system, believe it or not, they were more rebellious, mad at me half the time... So they’re supposed to rehabilitate them. Now my kids are on the adult side.” - Focus Group Parent

The juvenile justice system is intended to help children and ensure that they do not recidivate and end up incarcerated on the adult side. However, families argue that the current system is punitive and fails to provide effective programming, either for young people who are at risk or for young people who have already been adjudicated delinquent. Parents say that judges treat young people like they are adults and punish them instead of trying to find out what they need. They view children through a racialized adult lens; for example, by interpreting a group of friends as a “gang.”

“Don’t make them feel like prisoners because that makes them even [worse]... It’s not helping them, it’s messing them up more in their head. Instead of making them feel like ‘I wanna do better,’ it’s making them want to do worse, because they’re feeling like nobody’s on their side.” - Focus Group Parent

Moreover, the programming offered by the courts is inconsistent, ineffective, and short-term. Parents report that when they reached out to their child’s school or the court for help before their child was in trouble, nothing was offered to them. The programming is reactive instead of preventative, making parents feel like their only option for help with their child is to rely on juvenile court processes.

Some parents had positive experiences with alternative-to-incarceration programming, especially when their child was paired with capable and caring mentors, but then were heartbroken when the mentorship ended after a few months. There is a lack of consistency and long-term support for both families and children.

Children involved with the juvenile court system typically have experienced trauma and the system is not prepared to address that trauma or help children overcome obstacles in their lives. Instead, the process is often retraumatizing and dehumanizing, leaving young people confused about their future.

“Well [my son] would rather leave New Orleans. He told me. Mama, I could go live by your brother?” - Focus Group Parent

“My son is kinda depressed now since he got into the system... he’s not the same. He don’t wanna go outside, you know, he don’t wanna go nowhere.” - Focus Group Parent
OUR SOLUTIONS

We have highlighted several persistent issues in the Orleans Parish juvenile court. However, we do not believe that these problems are unmovable. Ubuntu Staff and our parent researchers developed four simple solutions that we believe would drastically change the juvenile court process, transforming it into a system that is more efficient, humane, and genuinely rehabilitative.

1. Provide a parent advocate for the courts
2. Set specific appointment times for parents in the docket
3. Make available successful, long-term rehabilitative programs
4. Involve parent and child input in the child's plan

1. Provide a parent advocate for the courts.
What this would look like: The parent advocate would greet parents when they arrive, present them with a booklet explaining terms, processes, and procedures, and hold workshops for parents new to the system. The parent advocate would be present whenever court is in session and would be available to answer family questions and address concerns.

Why? The presence of a family advocate would improve communication between parents and court officials and also would ensure that parents understand the process and have the information they need to support their child.

Who? We believe this should be a municipally funded position staffed by an outside organization. For example, Ubuntu Village could be responsible for training parents and providing parent advocates. In this way, the courts could also redirect some money toward parents who know the system intimately and are committed to helping other families navigate the process.

2. Set specific case times for parents on the docket.
What this would look like: Instead of telling 20 parents to all arrive at the same time, parents would be given unique appointment times, similar to the process used when visiting a doctor's office. Before confirming a time with parents (at least 3 days in advance), court personnel would check with the judge, the DA, and the public defender to ensure that the hearing is ready to go forward.

Why? Instituting this reform would greatly reduce the amount of time that families spend waiting at the juvenile courthouse. Courts will expedite their dockets more efficiently. It would allow parents and children to plan their days, communicate clearly with their jobs and schools, and hopefully avoid job loss and financial repercussions. In addition, the extra step of checking in about the status of the hearing will cut down on the number of times parents report to the juvenile courthouse unnecessarily.

Scheduling parents for specific times would also allow court personnel to assess whether or not it is likely that a case will be heard. For example, if there is a large trial scheduled in the morning, court personnel will be able to anticipate that the other hearings scheduled for that day should be cancelled ahead of time.

3. Make available successful, long-term rehabilitation programs.
What this would look like: The courts need to provide parents with a clear list of all the rehabilitation programs they offer, including which children are served by each program, the length of each program, and evaluations of the program's success. Even something as simple as a parent poll about their satisfaction with each program would help parents successfully choose services for their child.

Rehabilitative programming should especially focus on: one-on-one counselling, mentorship, and preventative services that target at-risk kids before they get in trouble.
OUR SOLUTIONS (CONT’D)

Why? Currently, rehabilitative programs are offered haphazardly and the programs themselves differ dramatically in quality. It is difficult for parents to mobilize outside resources to support their child. In addition, many of the programs offer only short-term services that are not available to children pre-adjudication. In the absence of effective rehabilitative services, children are likely to re-offend and end up in adult prison.

4. **Involving parent and child input in the child’s plan.**
What this would look like: Parent and child input should be incorporated at every stage of the juvenile court process. Parents and young people should work with the public defender and the judge to give their opinions and explain what they think would be helpful. Parents should be actively involved in helping to shape the rehabilitative plan for their child. This does not mean, of course, that parents’ opinions should outweigh the perspective of judges or other stakeholders, but parents should have a clear seat at the table. Parent and youth input should be mandatory at every hearing.

**Why?** Parental involvement is key to a child’s success and parents know their own child better than anyone else in the courtroom. They have insight about techniques that have worked in the past and the child’s hopes and fears. By involving parents directly in the process, they will be enabled to actively support the court’s decision and play a role in their child’s rehabilitation. By allowing the child to speak, the judge, parent, and public defender will be better able to assess which programming will be most effective and impactful.

CONCLUSION

Though we have identified many issues with the juvenile court process, we have also identified a clear path forward that would drastically improve the system for the parents and children who experience it. We urge the courts as well as the city government to take immediate action to make this a reality.

The juvenile courthouse does not need to be a dehumanizing and disempowering space, but can be transformed into a space of healing, assistance, and care. Indeed, despite our overall findings, several parents indicated that they felt like their particular judge or public defender had been extraordinarily helpful. Parents also told stories of children who had received effective counselling, guidance, and mentoring that had set them on a better path—all because of their experiences in the juvenile courthouse.

“[My child’s judge] is so sweet. She’ll tell me every day. Ms. —, I don’t wanna lock your son up, ‘cause I… know what it is, when he do go back there, I know what the destruction’s gonna be. So she try not to lock them up and she’s the one putting him into rehab.” - Focus Group Parent

 “[My son] just needed counseling for what he went through, so his attorney, she really helped him. You know, she really really helped him, and we was in the process of moving from here to Texas, but the storm happened. She had already found something for him in Texas to go to. Just that fast, but then the storm happened. Her and the young lady that works with her in the office. They really helped me.” - Focus Group Parent

*That should not be the exception; it should be the norm.*

We invite all readers to join us in our efforts to reform the juvenile courthouse. We will need all of your voices.

**UBUNTU! I AM BECAUSE WE ARE!**
REFERENCES


ABOUT UBUNTU VILLAGE NOLA

MISSION:
Ubuntu’s mission is to provide programming that delivers social, economic, and transformational justice to children and communities. We work primarily with youth who are involved in the criminal justice system and their families. Our program involves immediate triaging and connecting to services as well as longer term educational planning, skills development, mentoring, and leadership development. This includes anti-oppression training, know your rights curricula, restorative parenting discussions, participatory action research, and history lessons.

As they move through Ubuntu, families and youth gain job skills, feel more confident in their ability to navigate systems in their lives including the courts, address the harm inflicted by institutionalized violence, support each other, and eventually become leaders in their communities. Ubuntu operates under a harm reduction model in which we acknowledge the reality of participants’ lives and the very serious choices they face. We prioritize providing immediate economic opportunities to participants and families as well as developing strategies for long-term economic sustainability.

CONTACT:
Please contact Ubuntu Village with any comments, questions, or concerns. We especially would love to hear from parents currently navigating the juvenile justice system!

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