

# **Lessons Learned in Forming an Academic-Community Partnership with Families Affected by the Juvenile Justice System**

Katherine Schwartz, JD, MPA<sup>1</sup>, Allyson L. Dir, PhD<sup>2</sup>, Matthew C. Aalsma, PhD<sup>1</sup>

1. Indiana University School of Medicine, Department of Pediatrics; 410 W 10<sup>th</sup> St, Indianapolis, IN 46202
2. Indiana University School of Medicine, Department of Psychiatry; 410 W 10<sup>th</sup> St, Indianapolis, IN 46202

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## **ABSTRACT**

**Background.** Families of youth involved in the juvenile justice system (YJJ) are integral to YJJ wellbeing, so it is important to consider the direct input of YJJ families as well as YJJ themselves in justice system reform efforts aiming to improve YJJ health outcomes.

**Objective.** Our university research team partnered with one Midwest county's juvenile court, as well as YJJ family members, to form an advisory council to the juvenile court. We report lessons learned through a case study of this council.

**Methods.** Researchers reviewed and analyzed council records, meeting minutes, and interviews of varied stakeholders, including system representatives, leaders of similar advisory councils, and individuals with lived experience of the juvenile justice system.

**Lessons Learned.** Council sustainability required addressing participation barriers, valuing authentic experiences, seeking out system-based champions, and identifying concrete opportunities for members to be heard.

**Conclusions.** Investments in community health partnerships with YJJ families could improve system efforts to meet YJJ needs.

**KEYWORDS:** Mental Health Services, Adolescent Health Services, Community health partnerships, Family Characteristics, Parents, Social Conditions, Adolescents, Juvenile justice system

## Background

Youth involved in the juvenile justice system (YJJ), when compared to the general population, experience greater prevalence of poor health outcomes, including higher rates of both behavioral health disorders and infectious diseases.<sup>1,2</sup> They are also more likely to suffer the negative effects of several social determinants of health (SDOH), including trauma exposure, family instability, low parental education, and racial discrimination.<sup>1</sup> Despite their increased risk for negative health outcomes, YJJ rarely access or utilize needed health services.<sup>3-5</sup> Further, young people including YJJ are often left out of decision making related to their health and wellbeing.<sup>6,7</sup>

The families of YJJ play an obvious role in youth SDOH as an important component of a young person's immediate social context. Parents/guardians facilitate youth participation in health and social services by influencing their decisions, helping them navigate system bureaucracy, and providing access to resources like health insurance and transportation. Family engagement is similarly crucial for YJJ who must fulfill court requirements, which can include service attendance.<sup>8-12</sup> Though the available evidence is limited, parental involvement in court-ordered services has been associated with both reduced recidivism and better treatment outcomes.<sup>13,14</sup> Behavioral health interventions requiring family participation have also been shown to reduce adolescent delinquent or disruptive behavior.<sup>15,16</sup> Conversely, lack of family support and participation in community supervision is often cited as a barrier to youth compliance with probation conditions.<sup>11,17</sup> Acknowledging the importance of families to YJJ wellbeing, justice system reform advocates emphasize the importance of considering the direct input of YJJ and their families in system processing of youth, a space that has traditionally excluded their voices.<sup>12,18,19</sup>

Cross-system research in adolescent service utilization from education, healthcare, and child welfare, suggests several components of successful family engagement efforts. Among them are improving family knowledge of system processes, developing trust through transparent communication,<sup>10</sup> empowering families to participate in decision making,<sup>11</sup> and offering peer support.<sup>12</sup> Within the juvenile justice system literature, these strategies align with the concept of improving youth and families' sense of "procedural justice" or experiencing system processes as fair, regardless of outcome.<sup>20,21</sup> Approaches to engaging families of YJJ include support groups for parents of YJJ, orientation materials to families with new system involvement, or collaborative decision making processes between parents and probation officers. Attempts to increase engagement and foster a sense of procedural justice among families of YJJ must overcome a variety of challenges, among them a historically fraught relationship between court representatives and families.<sup>22,23</sup> Indeed, juvenile justice system processes are traditionally prescribed, with little power or opportunity for YJJ and their families to be heard. Honoring the direct input and experiences of YJJ and their families in justice system policy is a first step toward shifting this paradigm.

Convening community advisory boards ("CABs") or similar advisory groups is a common approach to engaging stakeholders and gathering information critical to improving system-level processes and outcomes.<sup>24,25</sup> CABs, comprised of members sharing a common interest and/or cultural identity, are established to reflect the perspectives of communities from which they are recruited.<sup>25</sup> CABs in healthcare settings are utilized to improve patient-centered practices and policies; the CAB engages its patient members in shared decision-making with service providers and system administrators.<sup>24</sup> In research settings, CABs help ensure that study design, procedures, and materials are culturally appropriate such that research positively impacts

target participant communities.<sup>26-28</sup> Articulated principles of the CAB model, namely system-level transparency and member equity<sup>24</sup> are particularly relevant to YJJ families who may lack voice and trust in the system. Similarly, there are lessons to be learned from youth advisory board (“YAB”) models, which have gained traction in both health<sup>6</sup> and child welfare<sup>29,30</sup> settings. These groups emphasize the importance of seeking direct input from young people and can extend CAB principles by including youth as equal contributors within boards.<sup>29,31</sup> However, to date, there has been little exploration of CAB/YAB utility within the juvenile justice system.

## **Objective**

We present a case study of developing a family advisory council (hereafter, “Council”) to the juvenile court through an academic-court-community partnership. The primary objective of the partnership was to improve family engagement in the juvenile justice system by providing an opportunity for individuals most affected by the system to be heard by court leaders. The Council would identify YJJ family priorities and then work alongside justice system officials to advance needed system-level changes and programming.

## **Methods**

We report on the process of forming and maintaining the Council and highlight relevant facilitators and barriers. We first describe the planning process between the research team and system representatives within the partnership. We also describe the research team’s analytical approach to gathering insights on the case. Lastly, we detail steps taken to form and maintain the Council before relaying lessons learned.

### *Partnership*

In late 2018, a county-level coordinator of the state's Juvenile Detention Alternatives Initiative (JDAI), a system reform effort funded by the Annie E. Casey Foundation (AECF),<sup>32</sup> approached our university-based research team (all authors) specifically to help form a community advisory to the court. The research team was contracted by the court to assist with recruiting Council participants, coordinating meeting logistics, and recording group progress. The team received modest funds for participant stipends (~\$25/hr), participant meals, and some research team time. System representatives active in the partnership included the chief of probation, the assistant chief of juvenile probation, two probation officer supervisors, the JDAI coordinator, and a juvenile court magistrate. These individuals made it clear to members of the partnership that their role would be to provide funding for the effort, offer institutional knowledge of existing system processes, and listen openly to Council member perspectives such that Council formation would be a collaborative process. The first Council members (i.e., individuals with lived experience of the justice system) once identified, were fully integrated into the partnership, working alongside system and research partners to ensure the Council's success. Seven of the original Council members remain involved in the partnership and continue to advise Council operation.

### *Analysis*

Throughout Council formation, the research team recorded key events, team accomplishments, and learning opportunities. Reflexive thematic analysis (RTA)<sup>33</sup> was used to extract common themes from the materials, including formal and informal interviews, meeting minutes, and community member applications. This approach to qualitative analysis was chosen for its accessibility and flexibility within an interpretivist paradigm,<sup>34</sup> explicitly allowing for the

authors' experience of the data as a resource.<sup>35</sup> RTA was well-suited to this case study, as all authors were fully engaged throughout Council development. The first author completed steps 1-3 of RTA,<sup>36</sup> familiarizing herself with all data sources, systematically coding each with thorough notes, and generating initial themes. Remaining authors assisted with RTA steps 3-6 by reviewing initial themes and refining them through multiple discussions and incorporation of extant literature. All authors contributed to this report to communicate agreed-upon themes. The report was reviewed and approved by other core members of the academic-court-community partnership listed in acknowledgments. The university IRB approved this study.

### *Council Preparation and Planning*

Before directly engaging with YJJ families, the research team worked with justice system partners to operationalize the court's vision of a family advisory council. The research team gathered input from similar CABs and juvenile probation officers working directly with YJJ families. JDAIconnect,<sup>37</sup> an AECF online resource center and forum, provided direct access to similar advisory councils. The team received technical assistance from Justice for Families (J4F),<sup>38</sup> a national network dedicated to bringing family voices into system reform work. The research team then conducted interviews with representatives from ongoing and disbanded advisory groups that operated alongside juvenile justice agencies. The team interviewed the director of AECF's national youth advisory council and members of the state's Department of Mental Health and Addiction community advisory council. Though consulted groups varied in their missions and makeup, the examples guided conceptualization of the Council.

Representatives from a local grassroots nonprofit were selected as Council facilitators and offered knowledge of group dynamics and successful team formation. In all, more than one

dozen individual or small group interviews were conducted. We were also able to review examples and templates of board participant recruitment flyers, member applications, and group bylaws and mission statements.

Overall, the advice received was that council success depends on creating space that empowers members to participate as equal and valuable contributors to the group's mission. Namely, as shared by a J4F representative, successful advisory groups appeared to upend the traditional power dynamic between the court and families and “invite families to sit at the table with justice system leaders” as respected advisors to system change. The research team received concrete, actionable advice to foster this type of environment. See Table 1.

Because the Council would be formed in partnership with the juvenile justice system and would require system buy-in, the research team also sought feedback from juvenile probation officers on the concept of family engagement in the system and formation of an advisory council. Of 59 juvenile probation officers employed in the participating county, 51 (86%) voluntarily completed a related qualitative survey.<sup>39</sup> Respondents' on-the-job experience differed widely, with 40% reporting <5 years of justice system employment and 17% >15 years. Average respondent caseload size was 21 youth. Survey questions included, “*How do families make it more/less likely that youth on probation will succeed?*” and designed partly to learn whether staff attitudes toward YJJ families would impede Council formation. Encouragingly, nearly 70% of respondents reported that family involvement in their cases was more helpful than problematic. See Table 2.

Probation staff were also queried about existing court-related barriers to forming a partnership with community members. Respondents expressed that the cultural shift to



incorporate Council feedback would take time. One officer stated, “It may take a while for court personnel to adjust to learning and hearing from [the Council]. I suspect that with the current court, at first there would be little to no change in attitudes toward a group of family members.” Several officers expressed similar concerns about achieving meaningful family participation, with one officer saying, “I’m concerned that it will become a venting session and not solution based,” and another asking, “How will actual solutions come from it - not just a lot of talk?” Respondents also pointed out that it may be difficult to achieve diverse Council membership, such that system experiences are reflected and communicated through the Council.

### *Council Formation*

Recruiting and gaining commitment from Council participants proved to be among the greatest challenges of establishing and sustaining the Council. The Court instructed that Council members be individuals with previous local justice system involvement, which meant that eligible participants were either 1) arrested or otherwise referred to the juvenile justice system as a minor and were currently ages 18-25, or 2) if older than 25 years old, a parent or guardian of former YJJ. Eligibility required no active or pending court cases involving potential members or their children. Court leaders were initially firm on this decision, explaining that they wanted to avoid the appearance that Council members may have an advantage over other system-involved families.

The first Council member recruitment methods included personal invitations/referrals from the research team or juvenile division staff, fliers posted in court hallways and probation offices, and email blasts to local service organizations and schools that were likely to interact with YJJ and their families.

Potential Council members were most often ineligible because of their own or a child's ongoing involvement in the justice system. Of note, these individuals expressed personal motivation to help effect system change. Recruiting 18-25-year-olds was particularly challenging; even when these young people met eligibility criteria, they appeared to want to distance themselves from their experience with the justice system. One young woman stated, “[Being in juvenile detention is] just not something I want to think about right now. That wasn't the best time in my life, and I want to move on.” Once individuals expressed interest in the group and attended several meetings, the research team worked to ensure their retention, notably offering frequent personalized reminders regarding meetings and events.

Eventually, more than one dozen individuals attended the first 18 months of Council meetings, beginning in the spring of 2018. However, as was the case for many organizations, Council participation lagged dramatically during the COVID-19 pandemic, which introduced many new barriers to participation. The group dynamic also changed as meetings were held virtually. Another pandemic effect was that the Council members who remained were a more homogenous group than the original members; 5 of 7 current members are Black women 50-60 years old whose children were previously system-involved. All current members are employed full time and otherwise very active in the community. As pandemic-related precautions subside, the next major goal of the Council is to recruit additional and more diverse group members.

### *Council Operation and Accomplishments*

During Council operation, the partnership identified the following activities as crucial to sustaining the Council: 1) onboarding members with information about current justice system processes and leadership, 2) fostering system buy-in, 3) developing a clear mission and operating

structure, 4) establish a Council presence in existing system leadership forums, and 5) providing Council input on local initiatives and research impacting YJJ.

Because we were unable to recruit Council members with recent system involvement, most of the members' system experiences were based on interactions occurring more than ten years ago. Thus, a primary Council goal was to educate members about current system policies and practices, as well as resources like health/social services available to YJJ. Several Council meetings featured guest speakers, including a local juvenile magistrate, a system intake supervisor, and a JDAI representative knowledgeable about local system diversion initiatives. Members were able to ask questions and express how different (or not) their own experiences with the system had been. Several Council members reported these meetings were especially cathartic, one expressing gratitude for the chance to respectfully confront system representatives.

“[During my court case], I felt that my time was disrespected... [My granddaughter and I] went to court over and over... All those times I went as a positive person willing to take my granddaughter into my home. ... I feel the judge could have made his decision earlier instead of me missing work and my granddaughter not knowing what was going to happen to her. I needed to get that off my chest and hear a judge's perspective, even if there's nothing he could really do about it now. ... Not too many people get that opportunity.”

Early onboarding meetings served another important purpose: As system representatives were invited to speak (and listen) at Council meetings, awareness of the Council grew. Soon, juvenile probation officers, intake staff, and judges/magistrates expressed interest in the group. One magistrate quickly became a Council champion and attended several meetings to encourage

open, candid discussion. Several probation officers recommended additional individuals from past caseloads as potential Council members. The Council also learned of several opportunities to provide feedback to the court, strengthening the utility of the group.

The Council spent their second year developing a group mission and establishing bylaws to provide some structure to group operation. The ratified bylaws were loosely modeled on those developed by a similar council in Pierce County, Washington. The Council's stated mission is clear and succinct: "The Council empowers family and young adult voices to impact system change as advisors to the Court." See Table 3.

Only one bylaw provision – regarding Council member eligibility criteria - resulted in contentious group discussion and was not adopted unanimously. Court leaders were originally clear that Council members could not have an active court case or pending charge. Council members similarly expressed concerns that those in the midst of justice system involvement may be too focused on their own case and associated emotions to offer clear-headed guidance to the Court. Yet, when recruiting young people proved difficult, the current Council members sought out input from the Pierce County council. They recommended reconsidering our recruitment approach and inviting individuals with open court cases. Pierce County council facilitators argued that excluding those with active system-involvement further disenfranchises the very persons that the Council hopes to serve; exclusion also discounts the value of their system knowledge and emotions regarding the experience. "You risk leaving out the authentic voices of people who are, rightly, motivated to encourage system change that helps all families." When asked about the appearance of impropriety, a Pierce County council facilitator explained that they invite as many defendants as possible to join the council so that all are aware of the equal

opportunity to be a member. Ultimately, a majority of our Council members voted to allow individuals with open court cases to join as members.

As previously described, inviting justice system leaders to early Council meetings had the bonus effects of creating visibility for the group and bolstering their credibility. Similarly, Council members were welcomed to all the county's standing JDAI workgroups, which focus on targeted system reform work and topics such as disproportionate minority contact, conditions of confinement, diversion initiatives. Before Council members joined the workgroups, they were comprised mostly of justice system administrators and leaders from local service organizations, many of whom had served for several years without the input of families and individuals directly impacted by the system. By the third year of the Council's existence, the Council members themselves began to develop a variety of initiatives and projects with less input from academic and court partners. See Table 4.

### **Lessons Learned:**

The processes described above offer several takeaways to share with others as they partner with families of YJJ and the courts to foster feelings of procedural justice in their communities and work toward improving YJJ health outcomes. Many of our findings parallel those of other efforts to develop and sustain CABs within other contexts.<sup>28</sup>

First, there were several key individuals beyond the Council members who helped ensure the ongoing practical operation of the group. Significant administrative time is required to recruit participants, maintain communication with members, schedule and host meetings, and handle the group's finances (e.g., member stipends, costs to attend conferences and workshops). Identifying a paid employee to manage group logistics is ideal so that Council member time can be dedicated

to activities that advance the group’s mission. Similarly, it is helpful to engage a neutral group facilitator who is not a state employee, such that this individual is not bound to the court objectives and policies. Even with neutral, third party assistance to help move the group forward, we also found it was important to ensure that the group was a known entity to justice system leadership and that there was more than one justice-system “champion” of the group’s efforts. During the three years of Council operation, a total of four different court/probation representatives directly oversaw Council work. Given that level of turnover, other Council relationships with justice system leaders and personnel has helped to ensure ongoing trust and sustainability of the group over time.

Second, we learned early on the common challenges of identifying, recruiting, and retaining potential Council members.<sup>25</sup> Future attempts to form community health partnerships would do well to identify the barriers to participation and address them directly through recruitment efforts. Stipends for Council participants, as for other advisory groups,<sup>25</sup> appeared to go a long way to communicate that member time is valued, and we took steps to ensure that the form of payments was easily accessed by participants. Efforts to consider lack of transportation, need for childcare, and a comfortable meeting space were also appreciated. Moreover, reconsidering the membership eligibility requirement regarding open court cases removed considerable barriers to participation and allows for inclusion of important voices and perspectives in the Council. Other research has similarly identified time commitment as a major barrier to participants’ engagement in CABs.<sup>25,28</sup>

Relatedly, our team learned that, to genuinely improve families’ sense of procedural justice and avoid tokenism,<sup>40</sup> we needed to identify concrete, diverse opportunities for Council

members to contribute their experience and expertise.<sup>28</sup> We found that by including Council members on established justice system reform committees and increasing the visibility of the group among justice system leadership, Council members reported feeling heard and respected in their partnership with the Court.

### **Conclusions:**

This case study of establishing a family advisory council to the court highlights the level of commitment required of all players to sustain this effort over time. However, once established, initial investments in this kind of community health partnership may offer a starting point to conduct high-quality participatory action research;<sup>41</sup> advisory councils provide the core stakeholder leadership necessary to attract additional community perspectives.<sup>42</sup> Future participatory action research would likely advance Council goals, simultaneously strengthening knowledge of the needs of YJJ and their families as well as linking research to direct action to effectively reform the juvenile justice system and improve the health and wellbeing of young people.

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Advice from other family advisory councils	How advice was enacted locally
<p>Address potential financial and practical barriers to council participation during recruitment.</p> <p>“We pay [Council participants] a lot, but we want them to communicate that their time is valuable.” – <i>youth advisory council director, DC</i></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Were transparent about time commitment required</li> <li>- Offered participation stipends comparable to local average hourly wages</li> <li>- Covered transportation costs</li> <li>- Served food during mealtime meetings</li> <li>- Welcomed participants’ children attending meetings as needed</li> </ul>
<p>Acknowledge and validate system harm to families, particularly the effects of systemic racism.</p> <p>“We had to be mindful that [council participants] had a chance to just talk and vent. This was probably the first time somebody asked them about [their justice system experiences], and sometimes a lot of our meetings were just spent listening.” – <i>family council chair, Ohio</i></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Focused several meetings on telling personal stories of justice system experience to establish the “why” of Council membership</li> <li>- Invited juvenile court judges, the assistant chief probation officer, and other probation representatives to listen to member stories</li> <li>- Provided data regarding disproportionate minority contact within the local juvenile justice system</li> </ul>
<p>Invite diverse group facilitators and speakers representative of Council members’ lived experiences.</p> <p>“Really, I think they saw me as part of the [system] and thought I had more influence on existing policies than I actually did... I think they felt I couldn’t or didn’t support what they wanted. It didn’t help that I’m a white female with no kids and no record.” – <i>chair of disbanded family council, Tennessee</i></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Sub-contracted with facilitators from a local nonprofit working closely with YJJ and their families</li> <li>- Invited chairs of a well-established council in Washington state to offer the group advice</li> <li>- Invited all members to attend both in-person and virtual workshops on family engagement</li> <li>- Elicited member-generated group rules, which emphasized uninterrupted opportunities to speak and reserving judgment</li> </ul>

Table 1. Guidance from community advisory councils

Type of family engagement	Probation officer examples
<p>Positive family engagement: Family members who are engaging in the youth probation process in a positive way tend to be proactive about their participation, reinforce probation requirements at home, and hold favorable attitudes toward the Court.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- "I know the kid will be successful if parents seek me out [regarding scheduling] to make sure they can attend all appointments and hearings. Like, if they're the ones looking for information and they're being honest with me about what they can do."</li> <li>- "It's great when [parents] have rules for their child that reinforce [probation] rules and sanctions."</li> <li>- "[An engaged parent is] abstaining from negative commentary [about the Court] and is being constructive, instead."</li> </ul>
<p>Counterproductive family engagement: When families fail to engage with the system in a positive way makes it harder for youth to complete probation.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- "[It is hard when families distance themselves from the probation process], saying 'I'm not the one on probation. I don't need services. It's my kid that got in trouble, not me'."</li> <li>- "Often, a parent's own criminal behavior or their negative attitude minimizes [the young person's] behavior, which doesn't motivate them."</li> </ul>

Table 2. Juvenile Probation Officer Experiences of Family Engagement

Council principle or belief:	Related bylaw provision(s)
<p>The Council’s purpose and goals should align with community needs and lead to local juvenile justice system reform.</p>	<p>The Council will:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Bring the needs of families and youth to the attention of the Court.</li> <li>- Provide a forum where young adults and family members can express their thoughts and opinions.</li> <li>- Improve understanding to bridge gaps between families, youth, and the youth justice system.</li> <li>- Actively help implement approved changes at the Court.</li> </ul>
<p>The Council should prioritize including individuals with “lived experience in the juvenile justice system.”</p>	<p>Definition of “lived experience”:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- A young adult, 18-25 years old, with previous personal involvement in the youth justice system through arrest/referral; OR</li> <li>- A family member (i.e., parent, guardian, primary caregiver, or sibling) of an individual with previous personal involvement in the youth justice system through arrest/referral.</li> </ul> <p>The Council will be made up of no more than thirteen (13) active members, the majority of whom must be family members or young adults with “lived experience in the juvenile justice system.”</p> <p>Active members have voting privileges and receive stipends for participation.</p> <p>All Council issues to be voted on, as described within these bylaws or otherwise raised by a Council member, shall be decided by a simple majority of voting Council members. Votes (yes, no, abstain) may be cast by voice/show of hands or written/electronic ballot.</p>
<p>Whenever possible, Council activities should be led by Council members and not purely dictated by the Court. A neutral third-party facilitator should help ensure Council autonomy.</p>	<p>Two Co-Chairs who are active Council members will lead the Council in partnership with the Court and the Council facilitator (e.g., an affiliated CBO or nonprofit contracted by the Court to serve as a neutral facilitator and fiscal agent for the Council). In the spirit of this partnership, representatives of the Court (e.g., the JDAI Coordinator, judicial officers) and representatives of the Council facilitator will provide information, guidance, and support to the Co-Chairs as needed.</p> <p>In partnership with the Co-Chairs, the Council facilitator will be responsible for all meeting logistics including invitations and notices, location, food, and any necessary supplies; distributing Council stipend payments; keeping Council records, including meeting minutes; and performing other necessary functions as determined by Council vote.</p> <p>Candidates for Co-Chairs include all active Council members who have lived experience in the youth justice system (see Article I) and have served on the Council for at least six (6) months prior to nomination for a Co-Chair role.</p>

Table 3. Example Council bylaw provisions

- Court orientation materials: A probation department-created video and pamphlet orienting families of recently arrested youth to court procedures
- Local COVID-19 needs survey: Probation department-administered survey of families with youth on probation regarding their needs for social services at the start of the pandemic
- Pre-arrest diversion initiative: A partnership with the local chapter of the Boys and Girls Club to limit police officer arrests of adolescents in favor of diverting them to programming at participating locations
- Community conversations series: An initiative by the local public defenders agency to bring together community members to learn about and discuss topics relevant to the wellness of surrounding neighborhoods
- Vaccination uptake study: A national study of COVID-19 testing and vaccination hesitancy by minoritized populations
- Statewide probation conference: Presentations offering probation officers insights into partnering with system-involved families to improve parental/guardian engagement in active cases
- Family navigator program: Local efforts to establish and pilot test a program providing newly system-involved families with a neutral representative to help them navigate the system

Table 4. Example initiatives and projects that sought out and incorporated Council input