



CTJJA: Building A New Table

SOURCES OF INSPIRATION

"I don't want a seat at existing tables. Those tables created and perpetuate white supremacy systems that have been used to oppress people like me. However, I will work with you to create a new table."

-Angela Davis (paraphrased), when asked about being invited to sit at previously exclusionary tables. 2/1/18.

"It's not about a piece of the existing pie; there are too many of us for that. It's about baking a new pie."

-Gloria Steinham

WHERE WE ARE / WHERE WE'VE BEEN

CTJJA's mission is to end the criminalization of youth. That's not changing. Our tactics in pursuit of that objective, however, are undergoing a structural shift.

The term "Alliance" has always been more than just a term of art to CTJJA: we operate as a true coalition of diverse juvenile justice advocates and experts. But it is past time that we come into full alignment with our most important allies -- youth directly impacted by Connecticut's juvenile justice system.

Whereas our work to this point has focused on speaking **on behalf of** youth, CTJJA's next phase of growth will be dedicated to **amplifying** youth voices using a two-pronged approach: training and supporting youth to take seats at existing tables, and working side-by-side with them to build new tables rooted in equity. The Alliance has, for much of its history, operated as a fulcrum in a dynamic, though fairly predictable balancing act. Positioned as an intermediary between the grassroots (schools, providers, lawyers) and grasstops (policymakers and state agencies), CTJJA has played a multi-faceted role as:

- **a repository** of institutional memory
- **a facilitator** of direct dialogue between stakeholders at different points along the jj continuum
- **a change agent** exerting pressure on legislators to make important reforms
- **an ombudsman** holding officials accountable for proper development and implementation of reforms

PARTNERING WITH YOUTH: THE JUSTICE ADVISORS

Going forward, CTJJA's primary role will be to guide and support directly-impacted youth as they take back their own narrative and speak on their own behalf. The first step on this new path was, in fact, taken in late 2017 with the launch of the Justice Advisors, an organizing-driven partnership between CTJJA and a group of young leaders with first- or second-hand justice system experience. Operating under CTJJA's core mission to end the criminalization of youth, the Justice Advisors also pursue the principal objective of ensuring that voices and experiences of community experts are meaningfully incorporated into all discussions around juvenile justice policy, practice, and reform. In less than a year, the inaugural cohort has demonstrated how much promise lies in the Justice Advisors model, further validating the long-term feasibility of creating a sustainable culture shift and of cultivating a pipeline of youth leaders. Getting directly-impacted youth "a seat at the table" will be important, but it's only a step toward our ultimate goal: building new tables where youth sit as equals.

The original cohort of Justice Advisors has firmly established themselves in and around Bridgeport as dedicated community organizers and motivated advocates for youth-centric juvenile justice reform. Not only are we on the cusp of onboarding several new Bridgeport JAs, but we are in active dialogue with other cities that have expressed strong interest in developing local JA chapters. In preparation for these growth opportunities, CTJJA and the original cohort have been working to formalize the official guidelines and framework of the Justice Advisors program, including:

- Role/responsibilities of JAs
 - Collaboration with fellow JAs on projects/initiatives that will further the overarching objective of bringing youth voices to all tables focused on youth issues (local government, program, agency, and legislative level)
 - Representing and promoting the JA priorities through higher-profile activities such as public speaking, media, presentations, or participation in local- or state-level working group/committees
- Capacity-building support for JAs (at both the organizational and at the individual level), including:
 - Training (jj issues, power/systems analysis, historical oppression, legislative process)
 - Personal skill-building (understanding your story, learning your strengths, public speaking)
 - Networking
 - Individual compensation, mileage compensation

TRANSFORMATIVE ORGANIZING: THE NEXT PHASE

The shift to a more youth-centric operation will undoubtedly be challenging, but in the context of CTJJA's overall evolution, we see this moment as a crucial decision point that will ultimately reenergize our mission and take the organization's credibility, effectiveness, and impact to a whole new level.

This transition will not happen overnight, but our progress should be measurable over time if we implement a series of concrete steps, such as:

- Providing JAs with in-depth training and support
- Creating more frequent opportunities for youth to speak directly to people in power, whether one-on-one or at established policy/oversight/testimony tables
- Maintain pressure on our own contacts at official tables to make sure that youth participation is not reduced to tokenism, but is taken seriously by all members
- Solicit youth feedback not only on how the jj system could be improved, but how decision-making tables might change so jj conversations are not entrenched in status quo power structures from the outset

ISSUES IDENTIFIED AS IMPORTANT TO JUSTICE ADVISORS

Local and state investment in youth and their communities vs incarceration and "the system"

- Fund things like neighborhood grocery stores, recreational options (not "just basketball"), and schools
- Meet the basic needs of families: housing insecurity comes up in nearly every conversation with youth
- Stop sending youth to prisons; hold kids accountable in ways that can help them get better, not get worse, and ensure the people who work in those programs actually care about and can relate to youth
- Find ways to provide supports that don't just "end." As soon as something is working it gets taken away.
- Don't set up programs so that kids have to get in trouble to get help. Kids know exactly what to do to get in just enough trouble to get the service/program they want.

Credible messengers and mentors

- Ensure those working with youth are those the youth can relate to -- people who look like them, from similar neighborhoods, with similar experiences. Youth want mentors/guides they can see themselves in.
- Programs should be rooted in community. JJ services should be provided by familiar people/programs already serving youth. Positive existing relationships should be prioritized over new, "short term" ones.

Legislative asks

- Stop sending youth to the adult system; get kids out of Manson.
- Raise the minimum age of juvenile jurisdiction to 12.