The Bill of Rights for Children of Prisoners Technical Assistance Fellowship Project

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- An Open Society Institute Fellowship Project was undertaken by Soros Senior Justice Fellow, Dee Ann Newell, in 2006.
- This is the first and remains the only initiative to attempt a multi-site, national effort to improve the care of children with incarcerated parents.
- The Bill of Rights for Children of the Incarcerated was the framework for the Technical Assistance fellowship project.
- The project goal: To identify one practice or policy change to implement for improved safety and security of children of incarcerated parents.
An RFP for partners with experience serving children with incarcerated parents was disseminated throughout the U.S.

More than 1,000 applicants responded despite lack of funds for the participants.
14 existing coalitions were selected as participants, based on a point system with 2 reviewers

- Each coalition had to have been in existence for two or more years, and have members who were advocates, service providers, and at least one policymaker
- Geographical diversity was also considered
- Arrest protocols, law enforcement training, child-friendly visitation, family impact statements were the most frequent changes selected
- The above were also considered as the most urgent practices and policies to be undertaken on behalf of the children
Variations in the Approach

Bottom-Up

- Some coalitions selected a regulatory change, a written informational document for helping the children, or a policy alteration without legislative action.

Top-Down

- Several of the statewide groups already moving in the direction of legislative actions to change systemic approaches, used the Bill of Rights TA Project as the cornerstone of their policy and practice improvements.
Practical Considerations

- Due to the variations in the state and local systems, correctional policies, economics, regional demographics, no entity does the same thing for very practical reasons of their region, e.g. political will, timing, etc.

- Necessary for the coalitions to be able to adapt to the prevailing political will, resulting in varying styles and approaches to the change potential.
The Bill of Rights for Children of Prisoners were used as guiding principles only

- Demonstrated need to better operationalize the rights to the more specific needs of the children—the primary consideration of the fellowship
Strengths Cited by the Partners

- Being part of the national partnership gave more traction to their efforts
- The potential for collaborative learning was initiated
- The cross-pollination of ideas and methodologies via the sharing and the final convening were cited by the partners as valuable
- Discussion of an ongoing learning collaborative but no funding was available to sustain the co-learning and sharing
Weaknesses of the first national collaborative effort for children of incarcerated parents

- No researchers were involved
- Process was messy—but may be necessary
- The centrality of the children often got lost in efforts to make overall criminal justice reforms that did not necessarily translate into child well-being
Recommendation

- Replicate the multi-site effort with researchers involved
- Improve identification of child well-being goals
- A focus on co-learning and learning collaborations to be sustained