

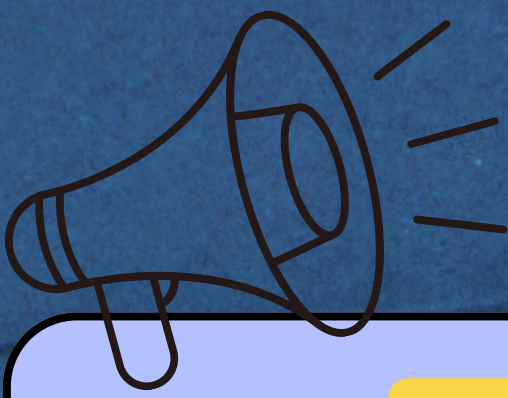


MANIFESTO FOR INCLUSION:

EMPOWERING YOUTH WITH LIVED EXPERIENCE FOR PENITENTIARY REFORM

CO-CREATED WITH:

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Why we are appealing to you

We, children and youth with lived experience in the justice system and deprivation of liberty, call on all actors of the justice chain to take action to promote youth participation in matters that affect us, ensuring that our perspectives and experiences inform the work of professionals within the system. Until now, our voices have gone largely unheard. Those who are affected do not get to have a say in the decision-making processes that affect them. But we say: value our voice. We can offer a lot of insights into how to improve the system, if we are given the space to do so. In our pursuit of a fair and rehabilitative youth penitentiary system, we declare the vital importance of including youth with lived experience in the development and implementation of policies and programs in the youth detention setting. This manifesto stands as a testament to the principle of "nothing about us without us," advocating for the active involvement of those who have navigated the complexities of the system to guide and shape the professionals responsible for its administration.

The inclusion of youth with lived experience is essential for authentic representation in the development of policies, training programs, and prison guidelines. Our unique perspectives provide invaluable insights that cannot be fully understood or appreciated without our direct involvement. We recognize the profound impact that lived experiences have on shaping perspectives and understanding the challenges faced within the penal system. Moreover, when young people feel truly listened to, they experience a sense of empowerment, as if we've been rightfully entrusted with the helm of our own ship.

A more youth-led, impactful approach

Youth who have experienced detention firsthand possess powerful personal narratives that serve as educational and informational tools. These narratives are a bridge to empathy, fostering a deeper understanding of the challenges faced by incarcerated youth and providing crucial context for effective and compassionate intervention. This inclusivity will contribute to the creation of programs that are sensitive, effective, and responsive to the unique needs of each youth in their care.¹

Through open dialogue, joint workshops, and shared experiences, professionals within the criminal justice chain and youths can learn from each other, breaking down barriers and fostering mutual respect. Such environments will contribute to a culture of continuous learning and improvement within the penal system. Collaborative efforts furthermore empower youth with lived experience to be agents of change, providing them with a platform to contribute positively to society.

Trust between staff and incarcerated youth is paramount for a rehabilitative environment. Youth with lived experience can guide the development of communication strategies that build trust and encourage open dialogue, creating a supportive atmosphere conducive to rehabilitation.² Additionally, integrating youth with lived experience into training programs will enhance the development of crucial skills, such as empathy and effective communication. These skills are vital for professionals to build positive relationships with those whose care they effect, leading to more successful rehabilitation outcomes.

Selected examples based on experiences

We call for the following to be prioritized when embedding more youth-centered approaches in detention policies and practices :

Leadership and staff of youth detention centers



Establish collaborative learning environments that bring together criminal justice professionals and youth with lived experience. When offering capacity building trainings, think about the role of the youth expert. They have the most insightful understanding of the incarcerated youth's experience, and this should be taken into account when developing capacity building or awareness raising programmes.



Run through the daily journey of the incarcerated youth, from waking up to going to sleep. How can this process be improved to ensure both the dignity and well-being of the individual? What does it mean to the youth if they cannot go to the toilet alone, but has to wait for assistance? Might it be having a bigger negative impact on them than is necessary?



Give youths a say in their treatment process. Young people who are incarcerated should be given the opportunity to co-create their care plan so that it is personalized to them. As is the case with the population outside of prison, mental health support requires an individualized approach.



Involve young people in decision-making processes regarding their education and training, in order to empower them to take ownership of their learning journey. This fosters a sense of agency and responsibility, which are essential for their personal growth and development. Education and training are vital components of successful reintegration into society after release from custody.



The act of subjecting young individuals to strip searches is inherently degrading and dehumanizing. Exploration of alternative measures, such as utilizing X-ray machines similar to those in airports, is imperative. At the very least, young people should be afforded the dignity of wearing a towel around their genitals or provided with a hospital gown during such procedures.

Penitentiary training academies:



Facilitate structural capacity building of staff led by youth with lived experience

Policy-makers:



Ensure youth closed facilities are well-resourced in order to promote an enabling environment wherein learning and exchange among youth and staff is imbedded in the institutional policies and practices

Civil society with competencies related to youth participation:



Partner with institutions to support them in engaging with young people in inclusive and meaningful ways.

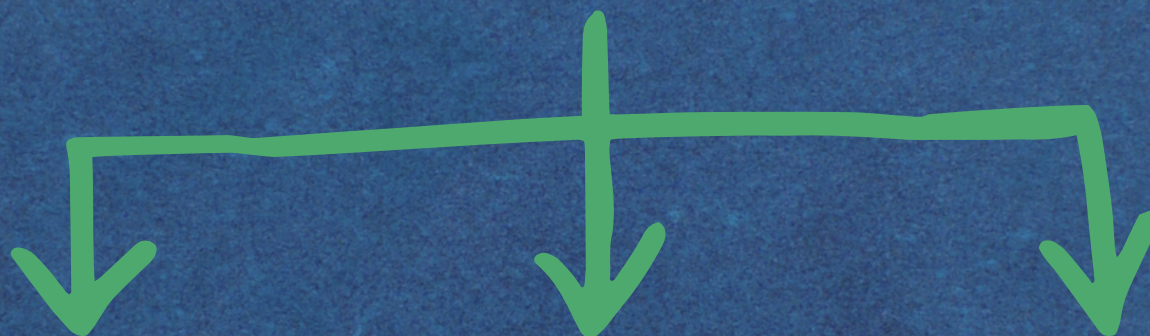
Let us give you an illustrative example: Mark mentioned that traditional CBT therapy would not work for him, he had absolutely no interest in sitting down and talking for an hour and would not get anything out of it. One prison where Mark was detained offered him movement therapy, which he found to be extremely helpful. However, when he was transferred to another facility, that opportunity disappeared. How a specific treatment plan is presented to the young person can have a big impact on their life and openness to therapy after leaving: In the case of Mark, he was deterred from the traditional therapy that his mother later wanted to attend together – this could have been avoided.

How to ensure these needs are being met

Youth participation can take multiple shapes and forms, including Advisory Groups, Councils, Feedback Boards, etc.

More important than the name or set-up is ensuring that participation is voluntary, informed and safe.

What does that mean?



Youth are not forced to participate, but their participation should be encouraged, the door should always be open for new participants and participation should feel valued

Youth should understand why they are being asked to participate, what is expected from them and what their participation will entail

Information provided by youth should never be used against them or shared beyond what was agreed upon

This manifesto was created as part of the Giving Back Project.

