

# **JUSTICE STRATEGIES**

## **Strategies for Engaging Suburban and Rural Communities in New Jersey**

### **Best Practices: Criminal justice reform efforts in Connecticut**

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## Best Practices: Criminal justice reform efforts in Connecticut

**Introduction:** This memo is designed to assist the New Jersey Second Chance coalition in their efforts to educate legislators that represent rural and suburban towns about areas of common ground they share with urban communities seeking criminal justice reform. Serving as a best practices document rooted in experiences pushing for criminal justice reforms in Connecticut, strategies from this memo are designed to help New Jersey advocates engage non-traditional allies in rural and suburban New Jersey on the need to reform New Jersey's criminal justice system.

**Background:** It goes without saying that criminal justice policies overwhelmingly impact urban communities, specifically in areas that have large black, Latino and immigrant populations. From mandatory minimums to police enforcement in urban centers, criminal justice strategies over the last 30 years have resulted in the largest prison system in the world and have destabilized urban communities all across the country. Although it is widely recognized that something must be done to address criminal justice efforts in urban centers, advocates must resist efforts that only look at fixing criminal justice policies in one segment of society. Based on learned experiences advocating for criminal justice reforms in Connecticut where a broad approach was used, this memo will highlight reform strategies that were used to build a political base of support in rural and suburban towns and as a result, strengthened overall criminal justice reform efforts. Lastly, it's important to note that the recommended best practices only work when applied in concert with strategies that get at the heart of the criminal justice system, which are to organize and engage people who most feel the impact of the criminal justice system to work for the elimination of the over-incarceration of black, Latino and immigrant communities.

**The Connecticut Experience:** In early 2004, criminal justice advocates, mainly from urban centers in Connecticut faced an uphill battle in efforts to reform Connecticut's criminal justice system. Probation and parole reforms, eliminating crack and powder cocaine disparity, increasing substance abuse treatment and allowing diversion for non-violent drug users were recommendations being considered by the Connecticut legislature. In direct opposition to reform proposals, legislators from rural and suburban districts resisted these policy recommendations and specifically, fought to remove crack and powder cocaine reform from the broader criminal justice reform proposal. Claims that reforms to crack and powder cocaine law coddled drug dealers killed any and all chances to reform Connecticut's notorious crack powder cocaine disparity law. During the following year of 2005, and in direct response to rural and suburban legislator's challenges to reform, Connecticut advocates adjusted their outreach strategies and began reaching out to people in suburban and rural communities about why they should advocate to reform Connecticut's crack and powder cocaine disparity. Because of these

outreach efforts in suburban and rural towns, strategies for reform evolved and a suburban and rural voice emerged. As a result, advocates learned that the criminal justice system was negatively impacting rural and suburban whites in a number of ways and fought to expand criminal justice proposals to include issues relating to overdose prevention and inpatient treatment for crack and cocaine use. A broader network of advocates also emerged, people from urban, rural and suburban areas of Connecticut joined a successful campaign to equalize crack and powder cocaine disparity and to also expand Connecticut's inpatient treatment protocol for people addicted to crack and powder cocaine.

### Key Strategies Used to Reach Suburban and Rural Allies

*Research:* An important piece of the puzzle in reaching suburban and rural communities was the use of targeted research. Specifically, people in rural and suburban communities were interested in how Connecticut's criminal justice system impacted them personally. Several research points were explored and campaign organizers agreed to utilize three key research indicators to reach suburban and rural populations. The research points were:

*Taxes and Budgets:* Campaign organizers showed how a ballooning criminal justice budget impacted taxes and limited resources for schools and other services and resources needed by the public.

*Suburban Trends:* Campaign organizers were able to show that an increased number of people leaving prison were re-entering suburban communities that bordered large cities. In doing so, organizers were able to show how these same suburban communities were not getting the resources/funding from the State to help formerly incarcerated people transition into society. A large part of this strategy focused on partnering with local governments and legislators from suburban towns on using the crack powder disparity discussion to advocate for more resources for their cities and towns.

*Overdose Prevention:* Through engaging people in suburban communities, advocates stumbled upon research that showed a significant number of whites dying from drug overdoses. Specifically, nearly 80 percent of all overdose deaths were of whites. In addition, during the course of the research, we found that the State of Connecticut did not provide for inpatient treatment services for people addicted to crack or powder cocaine. This strategy allowed campaign organizers the opportunity to talk about a criminal justice system that focused more on incarcerating people in urban centers than on prevention strategies for people addicted to crack and powder cocaine or mitigating the risks of dying from overdoses.

Other issues suburban and rural residents cared about were issues of fairness and inequity, what was happening to women and children in the criminal justice system, and issues concerning the poor condition of prisons.

**Public Education and Training:** Once campaign organizers developed key research areas that people from suburban communities would connect to, organizers put together a public education campaign designed to educate community workers, nurses, social workers and pastors that lived in rural and suburban communities. Campaign organizers and member leaders organized events, speaking engagements and public forums throughout suburban and rural Connecticut. Specific targets for public education efforts included: service organizations such as treatment centers, hospitals, social worker centers, etc.; university and school organizations like social or economic clubs; churches, mosques and chapels; libraries; civic organizations such as Lions and Kiwanis Clubs; and veterans' organizations.

The purpose of this outreach was to inform people of the campaign, look for common interests, illicit support from organizations and document stories about how addiction or alcoholism and the criminal justice system had impacted their lives or the lives of people that they served.

**A Statewide Network:** During the course of the campaign to equalize crack and powder cocaine in Connecticut, campaign organizers found it useful to organize a statewide alliance to represent the base of operations, a place for everyone connected to the campaign to meet and learn about the issues being discussed. The Connecticut Alliance met once a month and was designed as a large tent space to share information, knowledge and best practices for everyone in the campaign. On average 80 to 100 people representing over 100 organizations were in attendance. Also during Alliance meetings, lobbyists gave updates of what was going on with legislation as well as what areas needed to be organized to educate what legislators. The Connecticut Alliance also hosted national speakers in the areas of addiction, criminal justice and prison conditions to come and speak to new national developments, as well as to encourage what was going on locally.

**Training and Technical Assistance:** The stronger an allied group in the suburbs or rural part of the state was, the stronger the statewide coalition would be. In efforts to build local groups/organizations in suburban parts of the state, we organized issue training sessions that were designed to build the analytical skills of local groups through offering research, analysis and best practices. In addition to issue trainings, we put together grassroots organizing trainings that helped leaders in local areas better organize meetings, conduct outreach, educate local legislators and host public education events and house parties in support of our campaign.

## **The House Party Process and Method**

House parties emerged as the primary tactic in the Connecticut suburban strategy. House parties were designed as a tactic that specifically targeted average residents that lived in suburban and rural communities. House parties were small gatherings, personal spaces where everyday people got a chance to experience a “game of life” that immersed them in the realities of a broken criminal justice system. In addition, participants got a chance to talk about

their personal experiences with the criminal justice system and made recommendations on how to make the system better.

During house parties, fact sheets from research were used to communicate current issues and problems. When appropriate, personal stories and testimonies were given by people that were impacted by the criminal justice system (especially from people from rural and suburban areas) to legislators/public officials, treatment professionals and business leaders to communicate the many ways the criminal justice system is broken. Below is a typical agenda of a house party:

- I. Social (wine and cheese)
- II. Welcome and Introductions (people sign name and contact information upon entering)
- III. Why we are here? A formal but general introduction to the failure of the criminal justice system and what we expect to accomplish in the house party
- IV. Incarceration Community – A game of life that explains the realities of a broken criminal justice system (see game instructions below)
- V. Discussion - How CJ system impacts communities, individuals, parents, children, governments and taxes.
- VI. Explanation of the Fact Sheets
- VII. Introduce model legislation
- VIII. Ask for support: Sign a petition, call your legislator, host a house party, organize a public education event

Outreach: The house parties were organized through a snow ball strategy. Coalition members were asked to organize house parties with people they knew in suburban and rural towns. At the end of each house party, house party participants were asked to organize house parties of their own and the process continued to replicate itself. In addition to the snow ball strategy, people that were engaged in public education forums were asked to host house parties as well.

Below are examples of how initial house parties were set up:

Initially, 20 coalition members were trained on how to do a house party and each person was asked to organize a house party in a suburban or rural part of the State. From the initial group of 20, 14 house parties were organized in suburban and rural areas throughout Connecticut. From the first 14 initial house parties, an average of 2 people per house party agreed to host an additional house party of their own. While the initial snow ball strategy was in effect, students from the University of Connecticut were exposed to the issue through a public education event. At the end of that event, they agreed to do house parties in support of the campaign. Students were trained and began an entirely new snow balling strategy, separate from the initial one organized by the initial 20 coalition members. The students and their house party participants accounted for over 30 house parties at the end of three months time.

## Instructions for Incarceration Community

Game Items and Formula: Eggs= children; A Cup of Cheerios = Money; Baking Soda= Powder Cocaine (bags with different amounts); Sugar= Crack Cocaine (bag with different amounts); Yard Grass= Marijuana.

Game Staff: a police officer, a jailer (police should be someone from the organizing committee a jailer can be a volunteer from participants)

1. Set people up to sit in a circle.
2. Distribute game items to each person (distribute items based on how people have these same items in some communities). Give some people a little Cheerios and others lots of Cheerios. Give one person 1 egg and another 4 eggs. Give one person powder cocaine and someone else marijuana.
3. Once all of the items have been distributed. Simulate a police officer patrolling through a neighborhood (or the circle) and have them ask people, what kind of drug do you have? Not everyone should have drugs, but most should (an obvious exaggeration to make the game work).
4. Based on the laws in the state and what type of drugs people have, people should be asked to either go to jail or pay a fine for their substance use.
5. Those that go to jail must: go to a corner where the jailer is standing, give their child to another person and give their remaining money to the state to pay for services for children, treatment, taxes on their house, etc.
6. Collect taxes from everyone when: a child falls on the ground, when someone is caught with an amount that does NOT trigger jail but does not have enough money to pay for treatment.

After the police officer have asked enough people so that the circle of participants is no longer a full circle, but in fact there are significant gaps in a circle, then it's time to generate a discussion about how a criminal justice system impacts a community and the unfairness of laws based on what drugs people use and where people use them geographically.

For example, show the unfairness of how some people got caught for lesser amounts of the same drug (one person paid money for treatment vs. the other that went to jail) or compare the treatment of two people that were caught with totally different drugs (cocaine vs. crack) or how drug arrests are different based on whether or not you are in a school zone or not.

### Discussion topics generated from game:

1. Ask participants to look at gaps in the community. Talk about how a loss of social capital negatively impacts a community's ability to address social problems (must read Dana Rose and Todd Clear's article on Social Capital).

2. Ask participants that are incarcerated what they believe they are learning from being incarcerated. Use this opportunity to talk about prison condition issues as well as felony disenfranchisement issues. What will happen to people once they get out of prison?
3. Ask participants about the fairness of the drug laws. Have the group discuss why someone should go to jail longer for having drugs near a school zone versus outside a school zone. You can also talk about the federal crack powder disparity where 5 grams of crack get you the same mandatory as 500 grams of powder.
4. Ask participants about the growth of government from collection of taxes. Whether taxes will be collected from falling children or to pay for an expanding prison system, at the end of the game, you will have a large pot of Cheerios from tax collection. Talk about how that money can be better used if we had better strategies for treatment and prevention.